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Published by FICTION HOUSE, Inc., 461 8th Avenue, New York City

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Reg. U. S. Pat. Office

Frontier Stories

T. T. SCOTT, President and General Manager

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Volume 14, No. 3

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20c per copy

FRONTIER: Published quarterly by Fiction House, Inc., 461 Eighth Ave., New York, N. Y. Copyright 1939 by Fiction House. All rights reserved. This issue dated April 1st, 1939. For advertising rates address: THE NEWSSTAND FICTION UNIT, 9 ROCKEFELLER PLAZA, New York.

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The Scalping Parson

A Great Novel of Covered Wagon Days

By JED AGEE

THE Commandant's office in Fort Union faced the east and south. At the moment, Major Paul, in charge of the post, was pacing back and forth across the room while outside the snow whipped into a flat horizontal by the wind, swirled white around the window.

"Canby's been beaten twice," Paul flared,

half to himself, half to the infantry lieutenant who sat quietly beside the desk. "Sibley's beaten him. Do you understand what that means, Weyman?"

No answer was expected and the young lieutenant kept his peace. Major Paul took another turn across the room, stopped and faced his fellow officer. "I'll tell you what it means," he said. "The frontier posts have been bled of veteran troops in this war. Staunton has ordered them east to fight Lee in Virginia. Posts have been abandoned from the border to the north. Those fellows in Washington don't realize the importance to this country."

Paul flung himself down into the chair beside the desk, pushed papers from him and scowled at his subordinate. "Weyman," he announced impressively, "if this territory is lost to the Union, if Colorado is cut off, if California gold must go around the Horn, then the Union is lost for want of finances. And Canby throws a screen between Sibley and the north, and retreats after every battle!"

"Yes, sir," said the unhappy lieutenant.

"Without finances the war is lost," Paul declared. "If communications are broken, if the Confederacy takes this country, Lincoln and McClellan and the whole Union Army are hamstrung. Why don't we hear from Colorado? What has happened to the troops promised us from California?"

"I don't know, sir," said the lieutenant.

There was a discreet knock on the door. Paul, without rising, turned his head and flung an answer to the knock. "Come in!" The door opened, closed, and Paul turned in his chair. Instantly the scowl left his heavy face and his eyes brightened. "Ah, Tom!" exclaimed Major Paul.

The man who had entered the office was covered with smoke blackened buckskin. A cap made of beaver pelt dangled from the fingers of his left hand. There was a belt about his waist, pulling the buckskin hunting shirt close, and there were moccasins on his feet. He had leaned a rifle against the door jamb as he entered and a pouch and knife dangling from his belt completed his armament. His yellow hair was worn long and his eyes, blue and hard as sapphires, twinkled good-humoredly in his weathered, craggy, young face. There was an air of smooth power, certainty, competency about him and although he was not a large man, his movements as he approached the desk were like the smooth flowing strength of some giant cat.

"Hello, Major," said Tom Armand.

"Sit down." Major Paul gestured toward a chair. "What do you have on your mind, Tom?"

ARMAND seated himself. Deliberately he felt within the folds of his shirt, bringing to light a pipe, tobacco pouch and flint and steel. Kit Carson was in the south with his regiment of volunteers, following Canby, and Tom Armand was Chief of Scouts at Fort Union.

"A friend of mine came in last night, Major," Armand said. "Navajo. Name's Valiente. Had a little news." The pipe was filled now and Armand struck flint and steel, ignited tinder and lighted the pipe. He puffed a moment while Paul waited impatiently, and then spoke again.

"Somethin' stirrin' to the south, Major," Tom Armand announced. "Valiente had it that the Comanches are movin'."

Still Paul waited. He knew this man, knew that Tom Armand had been raised among the Navajos, that in that raising he had acquired the characteristic speech of the tribesman, that he could not be hurried.

"Seems like," Armand continued, laying aside the pipe, "that these here troublemakers are tryin' to line the Comanches up with 'em. They want to get the Comanches on the warpath. You know what that means. Them Comanches are bad Indians."

Paul nodded. He knew, only too well, that the Comanches were bad Indians. Horsemen, peerless among the plains tribes, traditional enemies of the Apache, the Navajo, and the Pueblo, the Comanche raiders sometimes aided and abetted by the Utes and the Kiowas, swept down into the desert country, raiding, burning, destroying.

"And. . . ?" Major Paul suggested.

"An' if the Comanches start there's no tellin' where it'll stop," Armand said quietly. "Indians are Indians. If the Comanches have good luck, what's to prevent the Apaches takin' it up? The Navajos, too."

"But they're enemies!" Paul exclaimed. "The Comanches and the Navajos are. . . ."

"Indians," Armand completed. "You don't know 'em, Major. If the Comanches get agoin', take some plunder an' some scalps, then the rest of 'em will start. The Utes an' the Kiowas, the Navajo, the Apache, even the Sioux an' the Araphos. It'll spread like a grass fire!"

Paul turned toward the desk and put his head on his hands. "More trouble," he said. "As if we hadn't already enough, what with Canby losing fight after fight, and the Colorado and California men not coming. . . . And you say the thing has already started, Tom?"

"From what Valiente tells me," Armand answered. "He says that the talk is out already that there will be guns an' powder an' lead for the Comanches. He says White Horse is already movin' with his band, an' that there's others comin' in from the east. He says his young men are nervous an' he wants to know what we're goin' to do. I wish Kit was here. He can handle the Navajos. They're afraid of him. He whipped the hell out of them an' they remember it."

Major Paul got up from his chair, walked to the window and stared out into the flying snow. "What are we going to do, Tom?" he demanded. "We haven't any men. I'm holding the post with a handful. Canby can't spare a squad. Carson's volunteers behaved well in the last fight, the dispatches say, but Luna's were very bad. Canby needs every man he has, to face Sibley, and if the Indians are armed, if they really fall into this plan, we've lost the country. Not only that, but the Union will be broken. Without the gold from California and from Colorado. . . . What will we do, Tom?"

"I thought," Tom Armand removed his pipe from his mouth and looked at it steadily, "that I might take a little *pasear*, Major. I thought mebbe I could do a little somethin'."

"One man . . ," Major Paul began.

"I'd take Miguel with me," Armand said mildly.

"I can't let you go!" Paul came to sudden decision. "It's suicide. You'd throw your life away. You. . . ."

Armand got up from his chair His moccasined feet carried him noiselessly to the door and he picked up the heavy rifle that stood there. It was a breech loading weapon, comparatively new, heavy, clumsy, and deadly accurate as Tom Armand handled it. "I ain't yore scout no more," Major," young Armand said softly. "I quit. So-long. I'll see you sometime." The door closed gently behind him.

In his chair the Lieutenant stirred. "That's the trouble with that sort of man," the Lieutenant blurted. "When the going gets hard they quit. They. . . ."

Major Paul whirled and faced his subordinate. "You fool," he said slowly. "Didn't you understand? I couldn't send Tom Armand out on a hopeless mission. I couldn't send him out to be killed, trying to check this thing that's brewing. He knew it and so he's resigned and gone anyhow. Lieutenant, you've just seen the last of a very brave man!"

FIVE days and two hundred miles east and south of Fort Union, Tom Armand and Miguel La Force halted their horses on the edge of a rim-rock. The snow was behind them, north and in the hills, and before them an endless brown country stretched away. La Force, small, beady eyed, a first class fighting man, slapped his hand against the buckskin cover of the rifle that rested across his pommel, and addressed his companion.

"Some place on south, Tom?"

Tom Armand had not told Major Paul, there in the Fort Union's Commandant's office, all that he knew. This expedition, this little force of two men and four horses, was not a wild goose chase, not a vagrant throw of the dice. Tom Armand knew, or believed he knew, that somewhere in the south, somewhere out of Texas, a wagon train was coming into the plains country. Not an ordinary train, this rumored caravan, but a definite menace. In it, so Valiente had said, there were arms, rifles and knives and hatchets, powder and lead and, because the Comanches in their many brushes with the white man had learned its value, gold.

"A rendezvous somewhere on the Staked Plains," Valiente had said, repeating the rumor that had made his young men restless. "They are to meet and make treaty with Bold Man."

Tom Armand and Miguel La Force were seeking that wagon train.

"We have found eet," Miguel said

shortly. "See Tom?" He pointed Southward.

Away to the south a thin line of dust arose, dust that was whipped away by the marching wind. Tom Armand, eyes keen as his companion's, laughed a little. "I thought you would see it," he said. "Let's go down."

"And when we get there what weel we do?" Miguel grumbled. "We are two men, Tom. *Dos compadres.* We weel need an army."

"We'll see when we get there," Armand answered, and his horse, with lowered head, gingerly picked a way down the break of the rim.

There were six wagons in the train. Watching the wagons from a hiding place just under the rise of a long ridge, Tom Armand and Miguel counted these and the men with them. Six teams pulled each wagon save only the last one. On each wagon box, except that last wagon, two men rode, alert, armed men with their rifles ready across their knees. Others flanked the train, five riders to a side, and on the nigh wheeler of each of the first five wagons another man rode, handling the jerk line. The last wagon was different.

The last wagon was drawn by four horses and in place of the top's being flat and tarpaulin covered, the last wagon was equipped with bows and beside it a tall gaunt man dressed entirely in black, rode a rawboned horse. The last wagon was an outcast, an off-color note in the composition, a word that did not belong in the sentence. The first five wagons were handled by professionals, freighters who had marched across the plains and knew their business. The last wagon was an amateur outfit.

"Don't belong with the bunch," Miguel La Force said, and Armand knew that his companion referred to that last wagon.

"We'll go along a ways and see," Armand said. "Maybe this ain't the outfit, Miguel."

"Maybe not," Miguel agreed.

They crawled back to their horses then and mounting, followed along parallel to the march of the train. Now and again either Miguel or Tom Armand, diverging from their course, spied upon the line of marching wagons. As dusk came the two companions held consultations.

"Will we watch them a while, Tom?" Miguel asked.

Tom Armand debated with himself. "We haven't got the time," he said finally. "If this is the right outfit we've got to know it. If it isn't we've got to find the right one. We'll ride in, Miguel."

Miguel La Force's teeth shown white in his brown face as he smiled. "Then we know, huh?" he said. All right, Tom. An' eef theese ees the right train. . . ?"

"We'll spike their play," Armand completed. "Watch yourself, Miguel."

Again came that flashing grin. "Seguro," Miguel La Force answered.

THE train had halted as the two riders, each leading a pack animal, came toward it. The wagons were pulled into a square, a loosely built defense against attack. Off from the wagons, on the good grama grass, the horses grazed, loosely bunched. There were other horses at the wagons, animals that were tied to wagon wheels. These had been driven in a little herd, following the course of the train. Plainly these men, these wagoners, were not pilgrims in the country. Their movements, the site of the camp, the wagon corral, even the fires, spoke of experience.

"Salty," murmured Tom Armand as the two companions rode toward the train. "Clear tough, Miguel."

Miguel made no answer. A man was riding out from the train toward them. Tom Armand and his companion halted their horses and Tom raised his arm, the hand palm out, in the old, old sign of peace. Miguel, his hands resting on his covered rifle, waited.

The on-coming rider also halted and lifted his arm, returning Armand's sign. Then again he started his horse slowly forward and Tom Armand and Miguel La Force rode to meet him.

Perhaps three hundred yards from the train they met and stopped. Armand saw a broad shouldered, bearded man who sat squarely on a big bay horse. The man's eyes were a light hazel and somewhere in the past a knife had gashed squarely across his face, leaving a scar on either high cheek-bone and on the bridge of his nose. Those three scars and the bushy brown beard were a badge. While neither Tom Armand nor Miguel had seen this man

before, both knew him instantly. He was Josh Shelnor and the knife scars had been gained in a fight at Brush Coulee. Shelnor's voice was a deep growl as he spoke his greeting. "How!"

"Howdy," Armand growled, and waited.

"Where," growled Shelnor, "are you boys from?" His eyes had taken in details of pack and equipment, face and figure. Now they were fixed on Armand's face. Curiously light eyes they were, their surfaces reflecting light but betraying nothing.

"The Canadian," Armand answered casually. "Got some fur. We're goin' to Franklin."

"Why?" Shelnor asked bluntly.

"To sell the fur," Armand explained blandly. "We heard there was some folks there. Heard there was an army."

Shelnor digested that.

"Are you headed for Franklin?" Armand asked.

The man from the train nodded. Armand smiled thinly, his young face hard. "We'll side you then," he said. "There's Indian country west of us. I don't crave no Apaches; Comanches neither."

"You a Messican?" Shelnor shot the words at Miguel. Then, without waiting for an answer, "If you are, you better keep clear of us. There's Texas men in that train."

"Me?" said Miguel blandly. "I'm Frenchman. La Force my name."

The remnants of the old French families were still common enough on the plains. Where white men had gone, there the French trapper and trade was to be found.

Shelnor nodded. "Texans don't like a Messican," he said. "Who you boys for, North or South?"

"For whoever buys our fur," Armand answered. "We're gant. How about gettin' in where we can cook a bite?"

"Come on," Shelnor ordered, and turned his horse. La Force and Armand exchanged glances and followed after the broad back of the train leader.

When they reached the wagons the newcomers were surrounded. The wagoners were tall men for the most part, bearded, long haired, wild eyed. Tom Armand and Miguel La Force had met many such, would meet many more. Disregarding the curious glances, the questions flung at them, they rode through into the little park made by the wagons.

"Help yourselves," Shelnor invited gruffly. "Don't expect us to hand out grub though. We're short on grub ourselves."

"What we want is company," Tom Armand answered. "Light down, La Force." Miguel slid down. With accustomed dexterity the two fell to unpacking the lead horses. Shelnor, watching them, spoke gruffly. "I'll have one of the boys take yore horses out to the *manada,*" he said. "Is that venison you got there?"

Miguel was unloading the hind quarters of an antelope killed the day before.

"Antelope," Tom Armand answered, and unsheathing his knife, bent down and deftly unjointed the legs from the loins. "Here," he offered, holding out the legs. "Have some meat."

Shelnor took the gift. For a moment his teeth, big and square and wide spaced, showed through his beard. "Boys will like some fresh meat," he commented. "We got some cornbread. You'll git some." He strode away, carrying the meat. Tom Armand and La Force continued with the swift details of their camp making.

THE wagons were encamped close by a cottonwood clump. There was water in the cottonwoods and Miguel, carrying the ax and a pail, walked off toward the grove. When the measured sound of his ax blows told of labor, a rider approached and stopped beside Tom Armand.

"Josh told me to take yore horses out to the *manada,*" the rider said. "Thanks for the meat. We ain't had time to hunt."

Tom, looking up from where he was disposing the meager furnishings of the packs, nodded briefly. "Got that buck yesterday mornin'," he said. "Who's Josh?"

"Josh Shelnor," the rider answered. "He's train boss. My name's Wiggins. Who mought you be, stranger?"

"I'll answer to Tom," Armand answered. "My pardner's named La Force."

"He ain't a Messican then," Wiggins said. "All right. I'll take yore horses."

Armand nodded and Wiggins rode off, driving the mounts. Miguel came back, one arm loaded with wood, the ax and pail swinging from the other hand. He

dumped down his load and methodically began to build a fire.

"I'll move around a little," Armand announced, and walked off, cased rifle athwart his arm.

At the far end of the little enclosure the men of the train were gathered about a fire. Tom did not join them. Instead he walked toward the wagon that so plainly belonged to an emigrant. Here, too, there was a fire, a tall black-clad man squatted beside it, holding a frying pan over the blaze. Across the fire from the man in the black clothing there was another man, short, thin, gray-haired, and as Tom approached, the whining tones of a woman complained from the wagon.

"I'm ahurtin', Molly."

A young, full voice, a girl's voice, answered from beneath the canvas-covered bows of the wagon. "Don't fret so, Aunty. We'll have something for you to eat in a minute."

"Howdy," Tom Armand said, stopping beside the fire.

The black-clad man looked up and returned the greeting. They gray-haired man stared. "The Lord be with you, Brother," said the black-clothed man.

Tom Armand stared at the frying pan. In it were four small pieces of salt pork. "Is that," Armand asked, "all you got?"

"It's all we got," the gray-haired man answered dispiritedly. "Grace's sick an' I cain't buy no more."

Armand turned and walked hurriedly back to Miguel. Again his knife worked swiftly and presently he returned to the other fire. He held out a backstrap toward the gray-haired man. "Have some meat," Tom Armand offered.

The gray-haired man took the meat and looked at it. The dark-clothed man boomed. "Heaven will reward you, Brother. Here, Caleb, give me that," and stretched out a hand for the backstrap. The man called Caleb relinquished the gift and the tall man, placing the backstrap on a box, began to slice off thick steaks.

"Brother Archibald's wife is sick," he explained as his knife worked. "She needs meat. I'll put this in the pan and . . ."

"Give it to me," Armand ordered. "Fried meat ain't good for sick people. I'll broil it." He picked up a stick from the pile of fuel and sharpening the point impaled the meat that was extended to him.

"Who might you be, Neighbor?" Tom demanded, squatting beside the fire.

"I am John Brower," the dark-clad man boomed. "A humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord."

"There's some tea over at my camp," Tom Armand said. "You could get some if you asked my pardner."

John Brower, rising, strode away, and Tom toasted the meat over the fire.

He was engaged in that occupation and pleasant odors were issuing from the steak, when there was a rustle in the wagon. Looking up from his cooking, Tom Armand saw a girl's face, the firelight illuminating each feature. For an instant Armand's hand relaxed and he almost dropped the meat into the fire.

II

THE girl was beautiful. Dark hair framed an oval face. The eyes were either black or dark blue. There was a flush of color on the cheeks and the girl's lips were red and parted a trifle, exposing the even white teeth. "Oh," the girl said, and hastily came down from the wagon. Tom caught a flashing glimpse of small foot and dainty ankle and then the girl was beside him. "Is that . . ." she said, "is that meat for us?"

"I'm cookin' it for the sick woman," Tom answered. "There's more on the box."

The girl's eyes followed the direction of his nod, saw the backstrap on the box and returned to Tom. "My aunt," the girl said. "She's ill. She . . . I'm Molly Duncan and I give you my thanks for your kindness."

It seemed to Tom Armand that the fire was unusually hot. His cheeks flushed and he took the broiled meat from above the flame and blew on it. "Here," he ordered, extending the meat. "Get a plate. The Parson's gone to get some tea. If yore aunt's sick, she can use some."

There was a little dancing light, not from the fire, in the girl's eyes. She curtsied gracefully. "We thank you, sir," she said. "You . . ." Molly Duncan stopped. Following her glance, Tom Armand saw Josh Shelnor, big and black-bearded, standing just to his left. Shelnor was scowling.

"I come to tell you," Shelnor rasped, "you'll stand a watch tonight along with the rest of us. You an' yore pardner. I taken a little bread to yore fire."

"I reckon I'll go back an' eat it then," Tom Armand drawled. "Here's yore meat, Miss Molly."

Accompanied by Shelnor's scowl, he strolled back to his own fire.

Tom Armand stood a guard that night, as did Miguel. Nothing disturbed the tranquillity of the camp, nothing happened, but Armand was conscious that the other guards not only watched and listened in the surrounding darkness but that he was under their constant surveillance. Miguel, too, had that impression, and once, approaching too near a freight wagon, a man raised up and with leveled weapon, ordered Miguel away.

In the morning the wagon train moved on. Tom Armand, with Miguel and the packs, took a position at the rear. He had decided that he would get no information from the surly, uncommunicative freighters and that his best source of information was with the Archibald wagon.

During the day Caleb Archibald dropped back and rode with Tom and Miguel, the tall preacher driving the wagon in his stead. Archibald was a talker, but his speech all related to himself, his wife, his niece, and John Brower.

Tom Armand learned that Caleb Archibald was from Kentucky, that he was a Northern sympathizer, and had sold his mountain farm just after the outbreak of the War, determined to go west to California, where he might make a fortune and where, certainly, the tides of fighting would not touch him. Molly Duncan, an orphan, had thrown her lot with her uncle. Grace Archibald, Caleb's wife, was ailing. The trip was doing her no good. But it was concerning John Brower that Caleb waxed eloquent.

"He's one of the feudin' Browers," the little man said proudly. "The Browers an' the Maxons have fit each other for years. John, he was right big in it. Then one of them Maxons shot him an' John went to the settlements to get cured of his wound. When he came back he'd felt the Call. He's a powerful parson, Brother Tom. He's a powerful exorter. He can snatch a sinner outen Hell quicker'n you could say scat! He fights the devil like he fit them ornery Maxons."

"He looks like quite a man," Armand commented.

"Brother," little Caleb said earnestly, "John Brower can split a rail straighter than any man in Breathit county; he's so strong he can wrestle down a bull, an' I've seed him do it. He can shoot a rifle-gun plumb like an angel an' he can preach hell-fire an' damnation till it'll fair curl yore whiskers. There ain't a better, truer man in the whole world than John Brower. Why, listen: That ornery Josh Shelnor got to hangin' around our Molly. Got pretty free with her. John Brower taken an' bent him back over a wagon tongue till I thought his back would break, an' Shelnor ain't said ary word to Molly since."

"How come you throwed in with this outfit?" Armand asked casually.

"We was goin' West, they was goin' West," Caleb answered simply. "I axed Shelnor if we could go with 'em. Molly was standin' there, an' Grace, an' Brother Brower, an' Shelnor said that we could."

Tom Armand nodded. He could understand how Shelnor, seeing Molly Duncan, would agree to accept her company for some weeks.

"We met 'em in Independence," Caleb Archibald completed, "an' we been with 'em ever since."

THE train halted briefly for a nooning. When it moved on, Tom Armand suggested that Miguel ride out ahead and hunt, a task that Miguel gladly undertook. At noon, too, Caleb Archibald took over the driving and John Brower, mounted on the rawboned horse, rode beside Tom.

The preacher was uncommunicative, seemingly wrapped in his own thoughts. There was a rifle across his arm, a long-barreled weapon, fully six feet in length, altered from flint to percussion lock. Tom commented upon the rifle and John Brower spoke shortly. "A Deckerd," he said. "Belonged to my pappy."

Toward evening Miguel returned. He had found a small herd of buffalo, had killed a cow and brought the boss meat and the tongue with him. These were loaded in the back of the Archibald wagon and Miguel rode toward the head of the train to tell Shelnor where the rest of the meat could

be found. Presently Tom Armand saw his partner and the man Wiggins ride off toward the north, leading a spare horse. The sight made him a little uneasy. He did not like to have Miguel separated from himself. Still, the little man was competent, fully able to take care of himself in any situation, and Tom dismissed from his mind the idea of danger to Miguel.

The train camped that night close by the banks of the Pecos. The wagon park was formed and the men fell into a routine that was carried out with almost military precison. Tom Armand, watching but taking no part, noted the disposition of the guards, the way the horses were watered and taken out to graze, the smooth movement of the whole camp-making. As for himself, he threw down his packs, without invitation, close by the Archibald wagon and when John Brower, ax in hand, started for the timber along the river bank, Tom accompanied the parson.

Returned, loaded with wood, he found that Miguel had come in and was waiting for him at the Archibald wagon. Miguel reported casually, that they had brought in the hind quarters of the buffalo he had killed, and then, drawing Tom aside, made further report.

"Theese man Wiggins hees try for find out who we are," Miguel announced. "He's ask questions all the time. I'm tell heem that we come from the Canadian weeth the furs. He theenks I'm damn' liar."

"All right," Tom said, "let him think so. You find out anything, Miguel?"

"About the train not so much. They are to cross the Pecos an' be at Rock Point *poco tiempo,* so theese Wiggins says. Hee's not tell me why. But Tom, I'm find theese."

Carefully, glancing about to make sure that he was not observed, Miguel put a hand into the bosom of his shirt and withdrew it. Tom, taking the thing Miguel held out, examined it in the firelight and then dropped it into the blaze. "Where'd you find it?" he demanded.

"Close beside my buffalo," Miguel answered. "Wiggins ees cutting up the meat an' I walk around. I find theese close by."

"It's a Navajo feather," Tom said. "Now, what are the Navajos doing down here? This is Comanche or Apache country."

Miguel shrugged. "Perhaps Valiente could not hold hees young men any longer." Miguel suggested.

Tom shook his head, his worriment written plainly on his face. "I hope that's not it," he said. "But that was a Navajo feather, sure as shootin'."

Miguel nodded in silent agreement.

That night, when the evening meal was over, a meal supplemented by supplies from Tom Armand's packs, the young plainsman sat alone near the Achibald wagon but yet not a part of the group around the fire. He was faced so that he could see Molly Duncan as she cleaned the few dishes, her sleeves rolled up, exposing her rounded arms, her eyes bright and sparkling as she laughed at some sally of Miguel's.

To Tom, where he sat, came John Brower. Brower also seated himself staring at the girl and the fire. The preacher spoke suddenly.

"You are a strong man," he said, "accustomed to the plains. Do you love the girl?"

TOM ARMAND caught his breath, the question came so suddenly.

"She is young and beautiful and in danger," Brower said. "Shelnor covets her. Will you protect her?"

"Yes," Tom said simply.

"You are a good man, Brother," John Brower stated. "Now tell me, what was it that your friend found?"

Again Tom caught his breath. He had thought that his brief talk with Miguel had been carefully hidden and yet this tall man beside him had seen it all. "A Navajo feather," Tom said. "Miguel found it by the buffalo he killed."

"And that is apt to be bad?" Brower questioned.

"I don't know," Armand answered honestly. "I have been friends with the Navajos. I was raised in a hogan. I just don't know."

Brower was silent for a long time. "These are evil men in this train," he said at length. "Evil men and bent on evil. I know. I have seen. Why have you joined them?"

"Parson," Tom Armand said, "I can't tell you."

"Is it because of the powder and guns in the wagons?" Brower asked.

"Powder . . .?" Tom Armand kept his voice low despite his astonishment. "There is powder and guns . . .?"

"In the wagons," Brower said firmly. "I am sure of it. I have wrestled with myself but it is not for me, Brother, to interfere. Men kill and maim each other, how well I know. . . ." The parson paused and then, his voice infinitely sad, continued, "I would to heaven that there was no lust upon this earth."

The strength of the man, his sadness, penetrated to Tom Armand. He put his hand on John Brower's arm. "A man is a man, Parson," Armand comforted.

The parson shook his head. "When I think . . ." he began, and then, "War is a wicked thing!"

"There's worse things, Parson," Tom Armand said. "Listen, do you believe in Hell?"

"There is a Hell," John Brower said positively.

"There'll be one in this territory," Tom Armand said grimly, "if those rifles an' that powder get where it's intended. Them wagons are bound for the Comanches. Do you know what that means? No? Then I'll tell you."

For five minutes Armand talked, his voice low, the words hardly audible within five feet of where he sat, and yet in those quiet words he painted a picture of rapine and bloodshed, broad sweeping strokes of horror upon a canvas of the West. John Brower listened, enthralled, and when Armand ceased, the preacher's voice came strong.

"It must not be!"

"No, Parson," Armand agreed. "It won't be if I can stop it."

From the fire beside the Archibald wagon came a little, sudden sound of pain. Tom Armand and Parson John Brower leaped to their feet. At the fire there was a commotion.

From the men, now clustered about, hiding the blaze, a figure came spinning. So intent had John Brower and Tom Armand been upon their talk, so absorbed in their conversation, that they had failed to see the men of the wagon train clustering about the Archibald wagon and camp. The man who had reeled out of the group crouched as he gained his feet. Tom could see a glint of light upon steel and knew that the crouching man, Miguel La Force, held a knife.

Tom shouted warningly, "Miguel!" and ran forward, the ever-present rifle in his hands, and from the men beside the Archibald fire there came a shrill, half-suppressed call of fright and then the hoarse roar of laughter. Beside Tom Armand, the parson ran. The two men clove into the group, sending men aside as the bow of a ship parts a sea. Then they were in the little clear space, close by the fire and just across the fire from them Josh Shelnor held Molly Duncan, one great hand grasping her twisted arm and his beard parted as he laughed.

The butt of Tom Armand's rifle leaped to his shoulder. The hammer back, and Tom Armand held the sights dead-center on Shelnor's head as his finger pressed the trigger. It was Parson Brower, moving like a flash, that prevented death in that instant. Parson Brower's strong hand, leaping out, grasped the leveled weapon, the thumb interposed between hammer and firing pin, pushing the weapon out of line. And it was the parson's voice, strong and rasping, that stayed the execution.

"TOM! Not now! Not here!" The instant the parson gained was enough. Tom Armand, returning to sanity, lowered his rifle. Brower wrenched his hand free, the fork of his thumb bleeding where it had been pinched, and with his own long weapon menaced the wagoners about the fire. Miguel, his knife in his hand, had elbowed his way to Tom's side and with snarling lips stared at Josh Shelnor, who had released his grip on Molly Duncan. The girl, nursing her arm in her hand, was cowering back against the wagon, and her uncle, Caleb Archibald, struggled vainly with the lock of a horse pistol that was a good foot and a half long.

"What are you buttin' in for?" Shelnor demanded, glaring at Tom. "You . . ."

"You'll keep yore hands off that girl," Armand answered. "I thought the parson had learned you to do that."

The reference to his defeat at the hands of John Brower made Shelnor even more furious. His forehead and his cheeks above his beard were livid with the blood that rushed to them, the scars thin lines of white against the red. The man's eyes were little coals of fire. Tom Armand de-

liberately passing over his rifle to Miguel, unlatched his belt and let it drop.

"If the parson didn't learn you, I will," he challenged. "Knuckle an' skull, Shelnor."

Shelnor did not hold a rifle. There was a belt carrying a knife and pouch at his waist, but otherwise he appeared to be unarmed. "Knuckle an' skull!" he bellowed, accepting Tom's challenge. "I'll clip yore spurs, rooster. I'll show you who's cock of the walk around here."

"You cain't fight here!" Archibald made his shrill voice heard. "My wife cain't stand excitement!"

In the semi-circle a man laughed. The parson's rifle and Tom's gun in Miguel's competent hands enforced fair play, and not a man of the wagoners had moved, save only Shelnor. No one paid heed to Archibald, for all interest was centered on the two combatants.

"Want her yorese'f," Shelnor jeered. "I'll make her forget you, cocky. I'll . . ."

"See it fair!" Tom Armand snapped to Parson Brower, and sprang across the fire.

Shelnor met him squarely. For a moment the two men stood, straining breast to breast, and then Shelnor's giant strength sent Tom back a pace. The scarred man followed that advantage, lowering his head and charging with a bull-like bellow.

This was no civilized combat between gloved men in a squared ring. This was knuckle and skull, as primitive a method of settling a difficulty as ever existed. Men came maimed from fights like this, an ear ripped loose, eyes gouged out; torn, bleeding, crippled for life.

Tom Armand, bending a little, met Shelnor's charge and his right knee flashed up into Shelnor's face. The knee did not stop the charge entirely, only slowed it. Shelnor's impetus was such as to carry both men back and to the ground, the semi-circle breaking and giving way. They lay there, a tangle of arms and legs, heaving and straining.

"Let 'em up!" a wagoner bellowed. "Get 'em on their feet."

A man moved as though to act on that cry, but the swift swing of Miguel's rifle stopped him short.

Shelnor was a giant for strength. Tom Armand, under the man, felt Shelnor's arms crushing his ribs, the hands great claws that tore through the buckskin at the flesh beneath. Armand knew that Shelnor had the advantage and that in this savage battle the man with the advantage won. He clipped the edge of his hand against Shelnor's throat, striking at the adam's apple, and heard the wagon master grunt and then gasp for breath. Shelnor's arms released their crunching embrace and two talon-like fingers sought Tom Armand's eyes.

Armand had been raging when he attacked. Now, as always in a fight, his first fury dissipated, leaving a residue of burning, controlled anger. And with that anger came, as always, the smooth flow of power to his muscles. Tom dipped his head, forcing it deeper into Shelnor's chest and his legs, muscled with bands of rawhide, locked about the teamster's middle.

There was a crushing force in those legs. Shelnor twisted under their grasp, forgetting, for the moment, his intent to gouge. In that moment the leg-lock was released. There was an explosion of power beneath Josh Shelnor. Tom Armand heaved him up, twisted, came atop and seized Shelnor's moccasined foot in his two hands, wrenching it up and back, twisting until the pain brought a bellow from the bigger man. Here, of necessity, was born the toe hold, that punishing grip of the professional wrestler.

Shelnor, squirming, was near the fire. An errant coal, popping out from a log, struck his beard and began to burn slowly. Tom Armand, atop the man, knee in the small of Shelnor's back, his weight holding the man down, wrenched and tugged at big foot and heavily muscled leg, bending it . . . bending it. Shelnor bellowed his agony.

TOM ARMAND'S face was a bloody, stone-hard mask. There were scratches on his cheek where Shelnor's nails had ripped as he attempted to gouge. His buckskin shirt, tough as a boot, was torn from the big man's grasp. A wreck of a man, Tom Armand, but there was no pity, no feeling on his bloody face. He saw Molly Duncan staring at him, her face white, her eyes wide with fright. He saw the utter ferocity in Miguel's snarl, the parson's face whereon satisfaction and horror strove for conquest; the bearded faces of the wagoners, the pallid countenance of Caleb Archi-

bald, and still he pulled and tugged, twisting the leg, working to tear the tendons loose from thigh and ankle, to make Josh Shelnor a cripple.

"He's had enough!" a wagoner bellowed. "His beard's aburnin'. He's had enough."

"Let him say so then!" The words rasped thinly through Tom Armand's lips. Perhaps Josh Shelnor heard them. Perhaps his almost inarticulate bellow might have been interpreted as a surrender. But it was the parson, stepping forward, who stopped the fight. The parson placed a hand on Armand's shoulder and spoke quietly.

"Let him go, Tom."

Miraculously, answering some inner force in the tall man that bent above him, Tom Armand released his grip. Shelnor's leg dropped down, a lifeless thing, incapable of movement for the time. Under the parson's hand Tom rose slowly and stared about, the blood running from his scratches to drip slowly from his beard down on his heaving chest and the buckskin.

"Take your man away," the parson ordered. "He was beat, fair and square."

A teamster bent to lift Josh Shelnor; another stooped to aid him. Among the wagoners a voice, twanging of Texas, said: "You ain't finished with us, you . . ."

"Let the man who said that step out!" There was sudden cold ferocity in Parson Brower's voice. "Step out, I say!"

Not a man moved. Even the men lifting Shelnor checked their movement.

"Go on then," John Brower ordered, after the little pause. "Go on!"

Action was resumed. Shelnor, on his feet, his left leg dragging, was carried away on the shoulders of the two men who had lifted him. The wagoners followed their leader, their voices a sullen muttering murmur of threat. Once more John Brower dropped his hand on Tom's shoulder.

"Brother . . . brother . . ." the parson murmured. "You would have killed him, or crippled him for life."

"Let him keep his dirty tongue and his hands from my friends then!" Tom Armand answered. "Miguel . . ."

He felt, rather than saw, Molly Duncan beside him. Turning, he saw the girl's face. All color had drained from her cheeks and there was a residue of fright in her eyes, but her voice was steady. "Here's hot water, Tom, and lint and bandages and goose grease. Aunt Grace says there's nothing like goose grease to heal a cut. Let me take care of you."

A light flamed in Tom's eyes. Now, in that instant, he could have answered John Brower's first question. "Do you love the girl?" John Brower had asked. Tom Armand could answer him now.

"Why . . . all right, Molly," he said, and sat down beside the fire. Above him towered John Brower, the long Deckerd across his arm. At the corner of the wagon Miguel divided his attention between his friend and the group that clustered about the farther fire. Miguel's own rifle was in his hands and Tom's leaned against the wagon beside him. Molly Duncan, fingers deft and soft, sponged the furrows on Tom's cheeks, applied the healing grease, and her voice, soft as her fingers and as deft with a man's heart as her fingers were with lint and unguent, murmured softly in Tom Armand's ear, "Do I hurt you, Tom?"

"Girl . . ." Tom Armand said, "Molly . . . I wouldn't of had you see that . . . I wouldn't for all the world. I . . ."

Again came the soft murmur, interrupting. "A girl," said Molly Duncan, "might like a man to fight for her, Tom. She might love . . ."

"Molly!" Caleb Archibald called from the wagon, "yore aunt's ahurtin' again. Come, Molly."

Molly, rising from Tom's side, answered the summons and Tom Armand, getting slowly to his feet, joined Miguel at the end of the wagon.

HE was there some twenty minutes later when Wiggins, the voluble man who had gone with Miguel for the meat, came walking to the fire. Wiggins paused and Tom Armand, the parson, and Miguel looked at him questioningly. Wiggins spat into the fire, stared at Tom, and spoke slowly. "I reckon you licked Josh fair," he said.

There was no answer to the statement and Wiggins spoke again. "You figgerin' on goin' on with the train tomorrer?"

"Why not?" Tom demanded.

Wiggins shrugged, and moving so that he was beside the wagon, leaned against a wheel. "The boys wanted to know," he

said. "Josh is one to hold a grudge, you know."

"He's been whipped twice; he could be again," Tom reminded.

Again Wiggins spat. His hands were behind him and he leaned against them. "The parson never licked Josh," he countered. "The parson grabbed Josh an' bent him back over the wagon tongue. Josh wasn't lookin' for nothin' like that from a parson. He wasn't hardly ready."

To that, John Brower said nothing, but Tom Armand made answer. "He was lookin for me," he reminded.

"Well, mebbe," Wiggins answered. "I thought I'd ask." He straightened from his slouch against the wheel, grunted, and spitting once more into the fire, stalked off.

Beside Tom, Miguel said, "We had better leave them, Tom."

"We've got to have a chance at that powder an' the guns," Tom Armand answered. "They ain't far to go, Miguel before they meet the men they're lookin' for."

Miguel shrugged. "I don't theenk we can stop them," he said. From the wagon, Archibald, hearing the conversation through the thin canvas, made plaintive declaration. "You ruint it, Tom. Now I won't get through to California. Shelnor didn't mean nothin' with Molly. He was just aplayin'."

"So was I," Tom answered. "I'll take you to California, Archibald. I know the trail."

The three, Brower, Armand, La Force divided watches that night. Not one of them offered to go out on his regularly assigned duty as train guard nor were they asked to go, a significant thing. Instead, with Tom and Miguel asleep under the wagon, Parson Brower stood, alert and watchful, beside the vehicle, or walked silent footed about it. Brower was relieved by Miguel and he in turn by Tom. When morning broke, Armand kindled the fire and when Molly Duncan, sleepy eyed, came from the wagon, he was there to greet her.

But the girl was not ready to resume the association of the night before. Indeed, she was shy and would not talk to the eager Tom. Perforce he had to leave her, for the horses were being brought into the little park the wagons formed, and the business of the day was progressing.

Accompanied by Miguel, Brower and Archibald, Tom went to get his horses. It was now that he had a chance to see the ruin he had wrought on Josh Shelnor. Shelnor's nose was a great swelling lump on his face and both his eyes were blackened. The wagon master sat on a tongue and bellowed his orders, not rising. That wrenching and twisting of foot and leg had tamed him, and Tom felt a fierce exultation.

With breakfast done, the teams were hitched in and from his place atop a wagon Shelnor gave the long yell for starting: "String out!" The lead wagon, carrying Shelnor, creaked ahead. The others followed, Caleb Archibald's wagon bringing up the rear as usual. The loose stock, under the care of three men, were already at the river, tentatively splashing across the ford. The lead wagon entered the stream and one by one the others followed.

Caleb had elected to drive that morning, and was on his wagon seat. Armand and Miguel, with Parson Brower, were waiting beside the wagon. The fifth wagon of the train entered the stream and started across, and Caleb, lifting his lines, clucked to his horses. They lunged ahead into their collars, the tugs came taut, the wagon lurched, the wheels moved, and then the left front wheel, freed from its axle, rolled clear. The wagon box came down with a crash, inciting a scream from Grace Archibald, and the wheel rolling into the Pecos, falling with a splash on its side.

For an instant there was absolute silence at the Archibald wagon. The fifth of Shelnor's wagons was across the river now. Caleb Archibald, rising on the seat, yelled thinly. "Hey . . . hey . . . wait!" he called. "We're broke down!"

On the last Shelnor wagon the guard atop the load lifted his rifle and waved it derisively, and then teams and wagon disappeared into the timber that lined the farther bank.

III

TOM ARMAND, with Miguel and the parson, came down from their horses. The packed animals stopped and the teams were halted. The wagon box was at an angle and there came the sound of a scrambling from under the bows. Bending down, Tom looked at the axle and then up to Caleb, who had subsided to the seat.

"Linch pin gone," Tom announced curtly. "You look at 'em this mornin'?"

"No," Archibald answered, his voice small, and then brightening, "but they was all right last night. I looked at em an' they was all right."

Tom and Parson Brower exchanged glances. "When he leaned against the wheel," Tom said. "Wiggins done it. He pulled the linch pin. They wanted us to drop out."

The parson nodded soberly. Miguel, going around to the pack horses, was removing an ax from beneath the ropes of the pack hitch. "Well," Tom said, straightening from his inspection of the axle, "I guess we'll make it. The axle ain't broke; ain't even bent much."

Miguel came with the ax and John Brower, without a word, waded out into the river, lifted up the wheel and came rolling it toward the bank. Miguel and Tom went into the timber and shortly the sound of the ax rang above the ripple of the water.

When Tom and his companions returned, carrying a long pole, the teams were unhitched, Archibald was carrying rocks to the wagon, assisted by the parson, and Molly had helped her aunt out from beneath the canvas. This was the first sight Tom had had of Grace Archibald and he was surprised. He had expected to see a thin, frail woman. Instead Grace Archibald was rosy and buxom, and did not look as though she had been ill a day in her life.

A pile of flat stones having been made beneath the axle, the pole was laid atop it and used as a pry, the wagon heaved up and held by Tom and Miguel, the parson hastily piled in more rock to keep the advantage gained. This slow process was repeated twice. The wagon box was level now and the parson, handling the heavy wheel as though it had no weight at all, raised it easily and slid the hub over the skein.

"Got to have a linch pin," Tom announced. "What have you got that will do, Archibald?"

Caleb Archibald did not know. He searched within the wagon, Tom joining him, and at length a bolt was unearthed that was small enough to go through the hole in the axle. The protecting washer was lost and the bolt would wear out, under the continued friction of the turning wheel, but at least it would take them on. Accordingly the top was bent over, the ax serving as a hammer, and a rock for an anvil; the bolt was put in place and the wagon lowered from the piled rocks.

All this had taken time and labor. Now, ready once more to move, the teams were hitched to the wagon and Archibald climbed to the seat. Molly helped her complaining aunt into the wagon box, climbed in herself, and while Miguel replaced the ax on the pack, Tom mounted and rode into the river crossing.

He splashed across, Archibald started the teams, and the wagon, its wheels complaining on the slightly bent axle, followed Tom. On the farther side of the ford Archibald stopped. "We'll never catch 'em," he said plaintively to Tom. "They gone on an' left us."

"You don't want to catch them," Tom said grimly. "They didn't want you an' yo're well shut of their company." He was thinking, as he spoke, of what he must do. Somehow he must reach those other wagons and somehow, he had not the slightest idea as to just how, he must keep Shelnor from delivering the load he carried. Archibald clucked to his teams and the wagon started again, and Tom, riding back to Miguel and to the parson, spoke briefly.

"I'm goin' to ride ahead," he announced. "Want to look over the country."

Miguel nodded. He knew that Tom wished to locate Shelnor and he knew, too, the necessity of a flank rider. This was Indian country and now that they had crossed the Pecos, alertness was a necessity of survival. "I stay weeth the wagon," Miguel said.

Tom nodded. "You too, Parson," he directed. "And keep both eyes peeled. This is a bad country."

Parson Brower said nothing and Tom, turning his horse, rode off toward the west.

WITHIN two hours he was again in sight of Shelnor's train. It was progressing steadily but now had changed direction toward the north as though no longer bound for the Rio Grande and the little Confederate-held town of Franklin. The change in direction puzzled Tom. He

followed the train a while, keeping it in sight, watching the flank riders and the slow progress of the wagons. Then, swinging farther north, he made a great circle back toward the Archibald wagon.

In that ride he saw nothing that was alarming, and yet some instinct, some inner sixth sense, spoke to him, telling him that there was danger in the country and that all was not well. Crossing behind the track of the wagon, he cut sign to the south and here he found a puzzling thing. Six horses had passed across the prairie, their tracks plain in the grass. These were not Indian ponies. One horse was shod all around and the others were shod behind. That was wrong for Indian mounts. Again the sign along the trail spoke of white men as riders. Tom wondered about his discovery. Why should there be a party of whites in the country, and what were they doing coming in from the south? He could not puzzle it out.

When he returned to the Archibald wagon he found that Miguel had ridden ahead and that Brower was alone, guarding the wagon. It displeased Tom that Miguel had left his charge and he fell in beside Brower. Evening was settling now and it was necessary that before dark they find a camping spot. Tom was glad to see Miguel riding at a lope toward them.

"Why did you leave?" he demanded when Miguel joined him. "I thought you were to stay with the wagon."

"I have found a place to camp," Miguel answered. "A mile ahead and a leetle south. There ees a leetle rock point and water. What deed you see, Tom?"

"Horse tracks," Tom answered. "An' I can't figger 'em out." He told the parson and Miguel of the tracks he had seen, and both men, listening, shook their heads when he was finished. They knew no more than Tom what the tracks had meant.

The camp site Miguel had selected was a little rocky point with a seep on one side. A little work with the shovel and the seep became a water supply. The wagon was pulled across in front of the seep so that there were rocks behind it, and the rock point came down toward the tongue. Behind the seep the little hill climbed steeply and then fell away sharply on the farther side. With the wagon across the hollow, the spot became a natural fort. Tom, hobbling the horses, grinned at Miguel, likewise engaged.

"Good place," he commented. "We got this slope of ground in front of us. We'd be hard to pull out of that hole, Miguel."

"I theenk so w'en I see eet," Miguel answered.

Brower and Molly, under Tom's direction, were engaged in picking up buffalo chips, the dry droppings of the animals that furnished food and fuel to the Indians. They had quite a pile of these when Tom returned to the camp, and breaking dry limbs from a little cedar close by the wagon Tom built a fire, adding chips that burned with a clear, smokeless flame.

The girl prepared the meal, using the last of the hump meat that Miguel had brought in. There was still a little coarse flour, some antelope jerky and some salt pork in Tom's packs, but the meal that evening was tea and meat. The men ate silently, looking out into the gathering darkness as though their eyes could penetrate the gloom.

"I don' like eet," Miguel said suddenly. "You remember that time on the Ceemarron, Tom? Everything quiet, an' then the Utes jomped us?"

Tom nodded. John Brower, a chunk of meat in one strong hand, spoke quietly. "The powers of darkness are about," he said. "I can feel the evil."

"You want to shoot mighty straight, Parson, if you see it," Tom admonished. "Evil around here generally wears a scalp lock an' feathers, an' screeches like the devil. I'm goin' to take a look around, Miguel."

Tom picked up his rifle and slipped away into the growing night. Miguel, his own rifle across his arm, took a station beyond the wagon. Molly Duncan carried meat and a cup of steaming tea to the tail-gate of the wagon, climbed inside, and her aunt's complaining voice issued from beneath the canvas. Caleb Archibald, undecided, joined Brower beside the fire.

"If Tom hadn't of jumped Josh Shelnor last night we'd be with the train," he said. "We'd be safe."

"Hush, Brother!" Brower ordered. "You know that Tom did right."

"Mebbe." Archibald was skeptical. "We'd be a heap safer, though, if we'd never seed him."

Brower made no answer and the time crawled along.

IN something over an hour Tom Armand came back. He arrived silently, speaking through the dusk to Miguel, to announce his advent. "Didn't find a thing," he said, when once again he was behind the wagon. "Not a thing. I brought in a horse an' staked him on the slope. I'll watch a while, Miguel."

With no comment Miguel spread out his scanty bed, pulled off his cap and lay down. Taking that hint, John Brower spoke to Molly and to Caleb. "We can go to sleep," he said. "Nothing will disturb us."

Molly climbed into the wagon. Caleb hesitated, and then followed his niece. Parson Brower could hear Molly going to her bed under the wagon seat, could hear Caleb Archibald grunt as he made his preparations for sleep. The parson took two long steps and bent down over Miguel. Miguel was already sleeping. With a sigh John Brower went to his own bed.

At midnight Tom awakened Miguel, taking that man's warm bed while Miguel crawled out to a vantage point. Miguel would awaken him before dawn, Tom knew. He relaxed on the little pile of robes and blankets, stretched his muscles and, instantly, was asleep.

It was dawn when Miguel woke his friend. There was a breeze blowing from the west and as Tom sat up, Miguel's whisper was sibilant in his ear. "Leesen! Leesen, Tom!"

Senses instantly alert, Tom listened. The little wind rustled the grama, rattled the canvas of the wagon, and on that breeze, from far away, came the faint popping of rifles.

"Do you suppose they've jumped Shelnor?" Tom demanded, keeping his voice low.

"Mebbe," Miguel answered.

Tom Armand came to his feet. "I'll go and see," he decided. "Miguel, you stay here. Don't move from this place. It's the best we can find if it comes to a fight."

Miguel La Force nodded his agreement. Tom, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, went to the seep, lay down and drank, splashed water on his face and ran his fingers through his hair. Then his morning toilet made, he went to the horse staked on the sidehill. It was the work of but a moment to saddle and bridle, to get into the saddle, and then Tom Armand, rifle across his arm, lifted his hand to his friend and rode away. Thoughtfully Miguel snapped dry branches from the cedar and kindled a little fire. The snapping of the cedar awoke John Brower. He joined Miguel.

"Where is Tom?" the parson asked.

"We hear guns," Miguel answered. "Tom's gone to see." He added buffalo chips to the blaze, watched the hazy smoke as it was whipped away by the wind, and frowned. "Better cook queek an' put out the fire," he said. "Theese smoke ees bad."

Brower walked to the wagon to arouse its occupants.

Tom Amand, riding northwest from the Archibald camp, used all that he had learned in his twenty-eight years to keep safe and concealed. The sound of the rifles had ceased and that in itself was an odd thing. If Indians had jumped the Shelnor wagons there were, surely, enough hard cases, enough experienced men, to have kept the fight alive. But the firing was done finished apparently.

There were not more than eight miles between the two camps. No man could hear rifle fire farther than that, and unless there was wind to carry the sound, it could not be heard that far. In the morning, with the damp air and the blowing wind, the sound could drift a distance. Certainly if guns were going, Tom should hear them now. He did not.

Tom Armand kept behind the crests of ridges, using the concealment that nature offered, and moved warily. His horse, veteran of many an expedition, seemed to sense his rider's alarm and fretted, throwing his head, his ears pricked forward. And then, three-quarters of an hour after leaving camp, with the sun climbing now to show its rounded body in the east, Tom Armand stopped his pony.

There below him, on a flat, were the remains of Shelnor's camp. There was a fire, still smoldering. There were the signs of the wagon park the little débris that, despite experience, remained. And where the park had been, there were six bodies. But of the Shelnor wagons and the Shelnor wagoners there was nothing. They had

gone, as completely absent as though they did not exist. Tom Armand, after a careful survey of the surroundings, rode down to the camping place.

IV

THERE were six men there six sprawling bodies. Tom went to them one at a time. Their lifeless bodies had been stripped of their possessions but not clothing. This was not Indian looting. This was something else. Wounds were in the back or the front of the bodies, indiscriminately. The dead men wore nondescript clothing, but as Tom bent down over the fifth body he saw a difference. This man wore the semblance of a uniform. There were buttons on the tunic, brass buttons, and the tunic was gray. On the collar were the three letters: C. S. A. Here was a Confederate officer. Tom touched the man and, as he did so, the man groaned.

There was water in a canteen on Tom's saddle. There was a little flask of brandy in a saddle pocket. These Tom brought and, kneeling, lifted the officer's head and poured a trickle of the strong spirits into the man's mouth. He stroked the throat, pushing the brandy down, and then, lowering the head he examined the body for the wounds. There were two both high, both in the back both oozing blood. Tom shook his head. There was no chance for this man here on the ground; no chance whatever. Still, he might revive for a time, might help him gain strength and consciousness before he died. Again raising the man's head, Tom gave him a little brandy. The man's eyes opened and suddenly he was a man no longer, but a boy, a hurt, bewildered boy.

"Easy" ordered Tom Armand. "Drink a little of this now."

Obediently the boy in the officer's uniform swallowed the brandy. He lay quietly and Tom knelt beside him. A spot of color came to the youthful face to the pallid lips. "You're not one of them," the boy said weakly.

"I'm not with Shelnor," Tom answered. "Who are you?"

There was pride in the weak voice. "Lieutenant Carl Gaylord, attached to General Sibley's staff."

Tom waited. No more words came and the scout asked another question. "What happened here?"

"We were sent to meet and convoy the train," Gaylord answered. "There are arms and ammunition. General Sibley would not consent to the plan. . . ."

"Drink again," Tom ordered, lifting the boy's head and applying the bottle to his lips. "General Sibley wouldn't let them go through with trading the guns to the Comanches. Is that it?"

"Yes," a weak whisper. "I was to take the train to Franklin. I . . ."

Tom had it all now. He had read the sign and now the boy's words told him the part of the story he could not read from the tracks the day before. "You told Shelnor your orders," Tom said. "This mornin' when you were ready to go, Shelnor's bunch jumped you. Likely when you were mounting yore horses. You never had a chance to fight back. Is that it?"

"Yes," the word was weak. "Report to General Sibley. You . . ."

Tom waited. Carl Gaylord's gray eyes were growing wide as though the boy saw something, someone coming for him. There was no terror in the eyes, only a comprehension and resignation.

"Tell Betty . . ." the boy said, and checked. The head rolled a little toward the east, and the gray eyes, sightless now, looked toward the horizon, beyond which, somewhere, the unknown Betty waited for the message she would never receive. Tom Armand got up slowly and looked down. He would, if he could, do something for this gallant youngster. There was nothing he could do. No time for burial; no time for anything. The dead were dead, and to the living must go all care, all effort.

"Poor kid," Tom Armand said. "Poor kid." Deliberately he turned and passing the reins around his horse's neck, mounted, and rode to the east. He knew now, knew what was afoot; what plans were laid. And in his hands lay the only hope of frustrating those plans.

Josh Shelnor somewhere to the west or north, moved steadily toward a rendezvous. With Shelnor, in his wagons, went the materials that would set the plains afire. Shelnor would meet Bold Man. They would talk, there would be whisky, fiery, potent spirits in the wagon. Bold Man and his warriors would drink and smoke, and drink

again. And then, led by Shelnor and his renegades, armed with modern weapons, the Comanches would fare forth, and fire and murder and rapine would spread from Texas to the Colorado line, from the Southwest to California.

Knowing no master save lust and greed; bound by no ties, unhampered by inhibitions, that terrible raid would spread until, like a grass fire running before the wind, it covered the country. And Tom Armand knew. And Tom Armand, and he alone, might act to stop this thing.

Engrossed in his thoughts, Tom forgot caution. It was automatic reaction, habit only, that caused him to keep his horse under the top of the ridge he followed, and it was habit, too, that made him keep proper direction. He had spent an hour at the camp site. A little longer and he would be back at the Archibald camp, and in that time he must reach a decison concerning a course of action.

He had not only a knowledge of what was brewing, but also the responsibility of the Archibalds. And there was Molly Duncan, sweet, brave Molly Duncan, and all that she promised and held forth to influence him. He could, perhaps, take the Archibalds through. Perhaps he could win to safety with them. There was yet a little time and in that time he could put miles between himself and the Archibalds, and the coming trouble. Should he? Should he go with Molly and let the country, all unaware, face the menace that was stealing upon it? Tom Armand shook his head. He could not do that.

SO far toward decision he had progressed and then his horse, stopping, ears erect and pointing, caught his attention, focusing it. There, far away across the rolling country, was a tiny bobbing line of toy figures mounted on toy horses. Tom kicked his horse with his heels and started at a run for the camp.

When he reached the top of the long slope, the camp perhaps a mile away, Tom Armand saw that it would be a close race. The Indians were, perhaps, a little nearer the camp site than he was, but they must come up the slope while he rode down it. They were Comanches, from all appearances, but the distance was too great really to tell. Certainly they rode like Comanches, free and light on their horses.

At the camp Tom could see the little figures moving about. The horses were already at the wagon and that meant that Miguel and John Brower had been alert and that they were ready for what might come. Tom's bay horse settled himself into his wild run down the slope, and Tom, the case off his rifle, crouched low on his mount. It would be a race!

It was a race! The bay ran full tilt, belly almost touching the ground, muscles bunching and releasing in surging power. Tom, bent low, estimated chances and distances. He should make it!

He did make it. Sliding the bay to a stop, Tom flung himself down, keeping possession of one rein. He pulled the horse across the wagon tongue, took a hasty wrap with the reins and knelt down, his rifle resting on the tongue. A glance showed the disposition that had been made. Miguel was crouched behind the front wheels; Archibald, armed with a rifle now, was at the rear wheels, and beyond the wagon John Brower lay at full length in a nest of rocks, the Deckerd stretching out before him.

Molly Duncan and her aunt were behind the wagon. Some goods had been hastily unloaded and piled with the packs and saddles, making a sort of breastwork. Grace Archibald, now that trouble had come, had sloughed off her ailments. The big woman held Archibald's horse pistol and she had been able to do something her husband had failed to accomplish two days before: The pistol was cocked. Molly seemed calm. She sat with her aunt, looking over the improvised fortification.

Out beyond the wagon the Comanches had reined in. Peerless horsemen, they reined their mounts to right and left, forming a little semi-circle about two hundred yards from the wagon. One savage sitting a pinto, jerked his mount and the horse curveted, exposing pawing forelegs and chest. In the center of the line was one tall savage, arrayed in breechclout and paint, and with an eagle feather in his braided hair. The panoply of the savage was gone. Here were no feathered bonnets, no decorated, beaded or quilled shirts and leggins. These men were stripped down for war. There were the little round buffalo hide shields, the lances, feathered and

tipped with steel, the flat bows and the quivered arrows. The big man in the center of the line carried a rifle and there were others so armed. Tom Armand knew the big savage in the center of the line. He was Bold Man, most potent of the Comanche chiefs on the eastern plains, and these men with him, about forty of them, were the pick of Bold Man's raiders.

Bold Man held up his hand in a peace sign and rode toward the wagon. Behind him his riders moved in. As he rode, the chief called, his heavy voice ringing in the ears of those at the wagon:

"How!"

Tom Armand straightened from his crouch behind the wagon tongue. He knew Bold Man. Tom had been raised among the Navajo, bitter enemies of the Comanche, and in his way was as famous as the Comanche chief.

"How!" Tom answered the greeting, and then, the distance between the Indians and the wagons lessened now to a hundred yards, *"Es bastante. Detengase!"*

Bold Man stopped his advance and behind him the others stopped, circling out a little to right and left. "They aim to jump us," Tom said, low voiced. "Watch the ends." Then in Spanish, which Bold Man spoke and understood, Tom called to the chief again. "What do you want?"

Bold Man's face was placid. "We are friends," he called. *"Somos amigos.* I wish to talk."

"Talk then!" Tom was watching, from the corner of his eye, a young brave that was on the end of the circle. That warrior was moving his horse cunningly. Under pretext of holding the fretting animal, he was in reality coming closer and closer to where Tom stood.

"Where are our friends the Navajo?" Bold Man called. "Why are you not with them, *hombre?"*

"The Navajos are close by," Tom answered. "I am going to them. What . . .?"

THE brave on the end of the line judged now that he was close enough. He dropped low on his horse and the animal sprang forward in a desperate dash for the wagon. Tom's rifle, snapping to his shoulder, spoke sharply and horse and man went down, not fifty yards from the camp.

Instantly there was action. Miguel, firing on the heels of Tom's shot, took his chance at Bold Man. Anticipating that move, the chief had swung his horse and disappeared over the animal's side even as Miguel fingered his trigger.

"The horses!" Tom yelled, reloading. "Drop their horses!"

The whole savage line was in motion, charging directly down upon the wagon camp. They came plunging through the dust, screaming devils on horses from hell, and into that dust and noise Tom Armand and Miguel La Force and John Brower shot coolly and with deadly accuracy. Horses went down as the charge began.

Tom heard the horse pistol boom almost in his ear. He saw John Brower, heedless of danger, stand so that he might reload more hastily. He fired again, the shock of his rifle strong against his shoulder. A horse reared straight up in front of the wagon and went over backward. John Brower's deep voice rang above the din: "Lord of Israel!" Then the charge had split and was past the wagon and, wheeling, Tom fired again and dropped down into the shelter of the rocks that made the rear barricade.

The Comanches circled, riding around the knoll and the wagon, clinging to the sides of their horses, their voices shrill as they whooped. Inside the circle, between the starting place of the charge and the camp, there were four horses down and a man's body sprawled. From behind one of the horses a warrior began to crawl away and, with a curse, Caleb Archibald lifted his rifle.

"Save the load!" Tom snapped. "He can't hurt you an' yo're goin' to need it."

The Comanche was a horseman. Where Apaches would have dismounted and begun a cunning, clever seige, stalking the embattled camp as they might stalk a deer, the Comanche rode and whooped and fired their arrows from the shelter of their running horses. The history of the white man in the West was this, and his success hinged upon one thing: The plains warrior was an individual fighter. His respect and concern was for his own safety, and while in the western conquest there were two whites killed for every savage warrior that died, time and again a small band of determined men had staved off the

attack of many times their number of savage warriors.

"Let 'em yell!" Tom ordered crisply. "Don't waste lead on 'em until they try to close in. Watch yore end, Parson!"

As the circle contracted about the knoll, arrows, looping high in the air, began to fall within the enclosure. The Comanches, hidden on the farther side of their horses, fired their arrows into the air, making a plunging fire on the occupants of the camp. Deliberately the men within the camp began to answer that fire, leading the horses and touching finger to trigger.

There were three fighting men on the rocky knoll, Tom Armand, Miguel La Force, and Parson Brower. The Deckerd was as deadly as the heavy rifle that Tom held, and its spiteful crack came as frequently as the heavier crash of Tom's rifle. It was surprising how few shots were fired. The three on the knoll were experienced and they shot straight, and Grace Archibald had pulled her husband down beside her and was forcing him to hold his fire. Tom could hear her.

"You never could shoot for shucks, Caleb," she stormed. "Give me that rifle. Now you hear me! Give it here!"

Presently the fourth rifle took up the labor with the rest and, at its second explosion, Tom saw a horse drop and a painted man roll free and lie quiet. The heavy slugs from the buffalo guns were going clear through a horse and reaching for life on the other side. The circle had thinned. There were nine horses on the ground now and four sprawling forms.

It was now that Tom Armand, risking a glance at his fellows, saw the parson in action. John Brower, the loaded Deckerd at his shoulder, was erect at the end of the wagon, as he followed a horse with the muzzle of the gun. From beneath the horse's neck a face and shoulder showed as the Comanche rider discharged an arrow. The Deckerd spouted lead and smoke, and the warrior, kicking convulsively, dropped from his mount. The horse plunged on and the rider lay there.

"Good shot, Parson!" Tom yelled.

"Heaven forgive me!" John Brower answered, reloading the long rifle.

Tom turned again to the business in hand and the circle widened as the Comanches drew off.

THEY did not go before they had done damage. Two of the wagon horses were down, both hard hit with arrows. One beast, Miguel had perforce killed with his knife to keep the poor animal from kicking. The other lay, big liquid eyes looking to the humans for help. Tom stepped toward the wounded horse and, as he did so, an arrow coming on a slant, struck his left shoulder just under the arm, penetrating the heavy muscle that lay there.

The shock and the pain checked him. He stopped, straightening to his full height. Then, with the arrow protruding, he finished his intention, bending over the horse and slipping his knife into the dark and sweating throat. Ammunition was too precious to be expended needlessly and a knife would do the work.

As he turned from the horse he found Molly Duncan beside him. The Comanches had drawn off, were now a long rifle shot away, close bunched about their chief. The girl's eyes were big with fright and her cheeks were pale. She gave a little gasp as she saw the arrow.

"You. . . ." she began.

"It's not bad," Tom declared. "Here." The arrow had not gone through. The tip of the head was breaking the skin on Tom's back but the barbed head prevented its withdrawal. Tom, laying his rifle aside, caught the shaft with both hands and pushed. The head broke through and calmly Tom gave the girl directions.

"Take my knife an' cut off the head so I can pull this out." He extended his knife as he spoke, and with trembling hands Molly took the blade, bloody from the blood of the horse. Tom turned his back to her and felt her begin to whittle at the tough wood of the shaft. The knife was razor sharp and the girl's task was soon finished.

"It's done," she said, and Tom, gripping the shaft again, withdrew it from the wound.

"You'll have to cut my shirt an' bandage me," he said, making his voice level and matter-of-fact. "Can you do that?"

"I . . . yes!" Molly answered. "Wait."

Tom sat down. The wound throbbed hotly and he pressed his hand against it to check the flow of blood. Out below the camp the Comanches were moving again,

riding slowly toward the knoll. "Hurry, Molly!" Tom ordered.

To aid the girl he took the knife which she had laid aside and working rapidly, cut away his buckskin shirt, exposing strong white torso and smoothly muscled shoulders. He felt the girl behind him as she touched the wound in his back, and again gave her orders.

"Wrap it tight," he commanded, lifting his arms.

Pain shot through him as he raised the left arm but he bit his lips and suppressed the groan that came welling up. Molly was working swiftly, padding the arrow holes with lint, wrapping white bandage around.

"Now," she said, and Tom lowered his arms. He could feel her hands as, with needle and thread, she sewed the end of the bandage. "That is all I can do. You must lie down. . . ."

"Not yet," Tom answered. "They're coming in." He heaved himself to his feet, feeling strangely dizzy as he rose, and picked up his rifle. The Comanches were riding forward, Bold Man in the lead. Once again they halted and once more the chief came on alone, his hand held up, palm outward.

"A treek," Miguel exclaimed. "I get heem theese time sure."

"Wait!" Tom ordered. "Let's see what he's got to say. See? The rest of 'em aren't movin' now."

A hundred yards from the wagon Bold Man halted. He sat there on his piebald horse, a magnificent figure of savage manhood. Tom, the white bandage swathing his chest, stood up. Bold Man's voice came deep and guttural, across the little distance.

"My son is dead," he called in Spanish. "You have killed him. You, Tall Man." The Comanche lowered his arm and his extended finger pointed to John Brower standing at the tailgate of the wagon.

"He says that the brave you shot was his son, Parson," Tom interpreted.

"Many horses must go with my son on the trail," Bold Man continued. "There will be weeping in the lodges. Will the Tall Man fight?"

Tom did not answer and the chief, after waiting a moment, continued. "I will fight Tall Man. If he wins, you go; if he dies, you go. Will he fight?"

HERE was a challenge to individual combat, with the possibility of winning free. Tom Armand thought swiftly. The parson, he believed, would have no chance in single combat with Bold Man. The Comanche was a famous warrior and a giant for strength. Tom Armand took a deep breath and gave answer.

"The tall man is not a great warrior," he said. "You know me, Bold Man. I will fight you. Then if you win, your son will have a good companion along the death trail."

"What did he say?" John Brower asked sharply. "What was it?"

"He wants to fight one of us," Tom answered. "His son's been killed. He says if I'll fight him we can go free whether I win or lose. I'm going to take him up on it."

The parson was watching Tom's face. Tom, turning back to the waiting Comanche, called again. "Shall we fight, Bold Man?"

The Comanche was shaking his head. Miguel, close by the parson, spoke abruptly. "Bold Man wants to fight you Parson. You keeled hees son."

"Keep quiet, Miguel!" Tom snapped. "You wouldn't stand a chance with him, Parson. He'll fight me. The Comanches have been after my scalp for a long time. He won't pass up the chance of takin' it. Ho, Bold Man! Will you fight me?"

"You're wounded, Tom!" Molly Duncan was beside Tom, clutching his arm. "You. . . ."

"'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,'" John Brower's voice was deep. "It is written so. Tell him I will fight him, Miguel."

Miguel La Force had followed Tom Armand many a mile, through many a year. To Miguel, Tom Armand was a sort of god to be worshiped and protected. Rising to his full height he called to Bold Man. "The Tall Man will fight you, *cabrone!* He will take your scalp."

"Miguel!" Tom snapped. "You . . ."

"You better get ready, Parson," Miguel said calmly. "Hees gon' fight you. You better ween too an' take hees scalp. I tell heem you do that."

John Brower was stripping off the long black coat. He folded it carefully and placed it deliberately on a wheel spoke.

His shirt and undershirt followed the coat. Looking at the parson Tom Armand could hardly restrain a gasp of admiration. Stripped, the parson was a giant, the muscles under his white skin standing out as though carved in marble by some master sculptor.

"He'll kill you, Parson!" Tom remonstrated. "He's a devil with a knife. He'll kill you. I'll fight him."

John Brower threw his long hair back with a shake of his massive head. There was a light in his gray eyes, a little dancing flame. "You are wounded," he answered Tom. "It would be suicide for you to meet him. In my younger days, Brother, when I was unregenerate, I was not unskilled. Give me your knife."

"No, Parson!" Tom moved now, stepping over the wagon tongue. No. . . ."

Molly Duncan caught at him, pulling him back. Tom staggered and pain shot through him, for the girl had caught his wounded arm. John Brower was out in front of the wagon now. Miguel's knife in his hand, the dull gray eight-inch blade that the smith at Fort Union had fashioned from a file and that Miguel had cunningly set in a buckhorn handle. "Steek heem like a peeg!" Miguel screamed. "Take hees hair!"

Bold Man had dismounted. The paint pony, well trained, moved off a distance. The Comanche, rifle and bullhide shield laid aside, advanced toward John Brower, knife in hand, and unfailingly John Brower met him.

Both men came on steadily, the Indian carrying his knife gripped for a downward, stabbing stroke, John Brower holding Miguel's knife gripped as a swordsman might hold a rapier. The distance lessened between the two, red man and white, and then, crouching, Bold Man began to circle.

"Watch him!" Tom yelled. "Watch. . . !"

The Comanche leaped in, his knife raised, his left hand groping, reaching out for a hold on John Brower. The parson had stopped when the Comanche circled, turning so that he kept his face to his adversary. There was sure competence in his stance, in the rippling muscles of his back as he held the knife before him. As the savage sprang, John Brower moved his body, eluding the reaching arm, slipping beneath the knife stroke.

Bold Man was a noisy fighter. He yelled as he sprang. He, too, was a canny fighter for even as John Brower eluded the downward sweep of the knife, so, too, Bold Man slipped aside from the parson's counter thrust. The two men came together, breast to breast, and as they met a brawny red hand grasped John Brower's knife arm at the wrist and so, too, John Brower caught the red arm lifted for another downward blow.

NOW, between the semi-circle of mounted sagaves and the wagon camp, the two men stood, a statue carved from white and red marble, a figure imagined by some ancient sculptor, motionless save only that muscles rippled as tremendous power was applied, soundless save for the low grunts of exertion. And then, slowly, the raised red arm began to move higher into the air as John Brower forced it up and back, and the great white marble arm of John Brower began to straighten as the knife in the parson's hand inexorably crept toward the heaving red chest of Bold Man.

The five at the wagon were immovable, their attention riveted upon these two straining figures. Even Tom Armand did not see the stealthy movement of the semicircle as the Comanches shifted toward the camp. Molly Duncan, with a little scream, bent her head and covered her eyes with her hands. Miguel was breathing hard as though he, too, were straining breast to breast with an adversary. And on the slope beneath the camp Parson John Brower's arm, straightening, moved a knife that bit deep into flesh. For an instant more the tableau held and then dissolved, swift as a carving of ice might melt before a blast of fire. In one instant the two, white man and red, stood there, and in the next instant, the red man slumped and hung limp, held only by the parson's great left arm.

"Hees hair!" Miguel screamed. "Take hees hair!"

The shout broke the tension. John Brower released his hold and Bold Man dropped to the grass, and in that instant the Comanches charged, screaming, yelling devils from Hell coming up the slope!

There was no time to retreat behind the barricade of the wagon. Unprepared, their

attention distracted by the tragedy enacted there on the slope, Tom Armand, Miguel, Caleb, were totally surprised. In one instant they were watching that combat between the giants; in the next they were facing a charge of screaming Comanche sweeping down upon them.

Tom Armand fired one hasty shot. He heard Miguel's rifle bang and Miguel's fierce yell of surprise, then he was swinging the gun with his one good arm, battering at a savage face that momentarily leered down at him. A horse struck him. He was thrown back against the wagon tongue. He heard Molly Duncan scream, shrill and frightened, and saw the belly of a horse above him as the animal leaped. A hoof struck beside his head. He tried to struggle up. All was noise and confusion, and in that confusion he heard a deeper, more guttural shouting mingling with the shrilled whoops of the Comanche. A flying hoof grazed his head. A red light flashed and blinked before his eyes and utter blackness possessed him.

Very slowly Tom Armand came back from the darkness. There was something soft beneath his head and there was a band across his chest. Experimentally Tom opened his eyes. The light hurt and his head rang like a great empty building might ring with a single shout echoing from its walls. He closed his eyes again and through the ringing heard Miguel's voice say, in Spanish, "He is coming back."

Once more Tom opened his eyes, this time taking it slowly, moving the eyelids carefully. He became aware that the band across his chest was an arm, and following along the arm saw a hand that he recognized. Molly Duncan was holding him. Pleasurably Tom realized that the girl's breast was the soft pillow for his head. He opened his eyes wide now and then closed them hastily, only to reopen them as quickly. This was surely a delirium he thought. Molly Duncan would not be holding him and he could not have seen that seamed and wrinkled face level with his own.

V

BUT now, opening his eyes again, he knew that it was not delirium. The wrinkled face was still there, and it was grinning. There was a black felt hat atop the face and around the battered hat was a red band. Valiente, the Navajo chief that was his friend, was squatting before Tom and beside Valiente was Miguel, and on either side of the Navajo were others, familiar copper-colored faces that Tom had known at Fort Union and Canyon de Chelly and along the western range: Navajo faces.

"Valiente. . . ." Tom said.

Valiente's grin became more broad. *"Muy bien!"* he announced.

With a little gasp Molly Duncan released her arm and Tom felt her hand push against his back. He straightened.

"A good fight," Valiente announced in Spanish. "We watched it and then we had a little fight of our own."

Tom was sitting erect now, the ringing in his head subsiding, he could look around the camp now. There were Navajos everywhere, sixty or seventy of them. Miguel had risen to his feet and Grace Archibald was standing beside Molly. Caleb Archibald had a rakish bandage wrapped around his head, and Parson Brower, still naked to the waist and with sinsiter red splashes on arms and torso, was near by Caleb. They had come through the fight unharmed save for minor injuries.

Valiente was talking. It was simple enough as Valiente explained it. He had left Fort Union and gone back home. There he had talked it over with his council and made a decision. If the Comanches were to meet Shelnor's wagons and receive firearms, then what could be simpler than to meet the Comanches when they were not looking for trouble? There were numerous young men among the Navajo that were impatient and needing a fight. A bunch of surprised Comanches would be a good thing for those young men.

So Valiente and his braves had sallied forth. They had followed the wagon train. One had left a feather, the feather that Miguel had found, close beside the buffalo carcass so that Miguel and Tom would know their friends were in the country. They had gone on after Shelnor and when they had seen that a wagon had dropped out they came back, just in time to see John Brower meet Bold Man and to take a little hand in the fight that followed the surprise attack.

"My young men have many scalps,"

Valiente said complacently. "They are satisfied. I have taken a scalp, but it is not mine to keep."

Valiente was a showman. Having made that announcement he stood up and produced a bloody-ended length of hair. This he held out toward Parson Brower. The Navajo's face showed his respect as he spoke. "Here is Bold Man's scalp," he announced. "Take it. It is yours."

"Take it, Parson," Tom commanded quickly. "It's the highest compliment he can pay you. Don't insult him."

Parson John Brower looked from Tom to Valiente and then, slowly, reached out a brawny hand and took the scalp. Around him the Navajos grunted approvingly and eyed him with respectful, admiring glances.

"Where is the wagon train, Valiente?" Tom asked.

Valiente's eyes twinkled. *"Allá,"* he announced with a gesture toward the west. *"Los Comanches estan aquí,"* and his wrinkled thumb pointed toward the ground.

"Help me up, Miguel," Tom commanded.

Miguel assisted him to his feet. About him the Navajo clustered. Tom was a favorite among them and they respected him, but for the most part they watched John Brower.

Miguel hastened off to return with a shirt which he pulled over Tom's head. Valiente made gestures and struggled with the English language. "Theese mans," Valiente indicated the parson, *"es mucho hombre. Un hombre bravo!"* The effort at English was too much. Valiente had lapsed into Spanish. The Navajo, Tom gathered, admired Parson John Brower very much. They wanted to keep him with them.

But Tom could not concentrate upon Valiente's paeon of praise for John Brower. He was thinking, thinking of that wagon train crawling west, moving toward its rendezvous. True that there were not quite so many Comanches to keep that rendezvous, true that Bold Man was dead and his band dessimated; still there remained the menace of those loaded wagons, of John Shelnor's evil mind, of the renegades that followed Shelnor.

Not until those men were dead, not until that train was destroyed could Tom Armand rest. And he dared not turn the Navajos loose against the train. The Navajos were Indians, savages. They were not immoral; they were simply unmoral. To an Indian a fight was fun; a tortured man, a mirthful sight; a raid, be it against an hereditary enemy or an unprotected white settlement, a daring, intriguing adventure. Let the Navajos loose against that wagon train and they would arm and equip themselves. How they used that equipment would depend upon their mood. It might prove as dangerous in Navajo hands as in any others. No, the wagon train must be destroyed.

TOM ARMAND was jerked back to the present by Molly Duncan. Molly came to his side, a little shyly, hiding her eyes from him, and she was carrying a stick upon which was impaled an antelope steak, fresh broiled at the fire. The odor of that broiled steak was almost too much for Tom. He realized that he was ravenously hungry, that he had not eaten since the night before, and that it was now long past noon, almost evening.

He thanked the girl for the meat and before she turned away she looked full into his eyes. There was no doubt of what she read there, no doubt of what Tom read in her eyes. He hesitated an instant, moving to follow her as she went back to where her aunt bent above the fire. Then he stopped. He had a task yet to do. When he had completed that, *if* he completed that task, he would come back to Molly Duncan. Until that time he must remain silent.

The meat was hot and good. It was scorched on the outside and raw within and Tom could fairly feel the strength returning to his muscles as he ate. A second steak followed the first, and a cup of tea. Molly Duncan and her aunt were busy. The Navajos were competent enough, they had furnished meat, but they would not cook it when there were squaws about.

Miguel, coming up to Tom, spoke low voiced in Spanish. "Valiente thinks the parson is a great warrior," Miguel said.

"And so he is," Tom replied.

"If the parson would stay with Valiente he could do much good," Miguel said gravely. "They would listen to him."

Tom nodded. It was an idea. "We have got to stop Shelnor," he said. "Tonight, Miguel."

"These Navojs. . . ." Miguel began.

"We can't trust them," Tom interposed hastily. "It would be about as bad for them to have the guns as for the Comanche."

Miguel thought that over, and nodded. "So. . . ?" he asked.

"So you and I will try," Tom said briefly. "I'll talk to Valiente."

He walked away, carrying his unfinished meat, to where Valiente and John Brower, surrounded by a dozen savages, were eating. Tom squatted down beside them, his left arm dangling from his injured shoulder.

"I've got to make a ride," Tom announced without preamble, addressing John Brower. "Miguel an' me have to make a try for that train."

Parson John Brower shook his head. "You can't do it," he said bluntly. "You've been hurt and you are weak."

"I'm goin' to do it, Tom answered doggedly. "Parson, you got to stay here an' keep these Navajos in line."

"I?" Brower asked, astonished. "What can I do?"

"They think yo're big medicine," Tom said. "Ever since you killed Bold Man an' took that scalp from Valiente they've had their eyes on you. You don't save Indians, Parson, but you can do more with this bunch than any man livin'. Now I'm goin' to talk to Valiente. I'm goin' to tell him that yo're not just a brave but that yo're a medicine man. Their medicine men are their preachers, so you'll qualify. I'm goin' to tell Valiente that you have made medicine an' that yore medicine says they got to stay here for a day. An' you stick with 'em, Parson. You hold 'em in line.

"If the Navajos get those guns an' powder, they'll be almost as bad as the Comanches."

"How do you hope to stop Shelnor?" Brower asked. "You and Miguel. Two men against twenty-five! You haven't a chance."

"Mebbe not, but we'll make a try," Tom Armand answered. "An' Parson, if I don't come back from this raid you look after Molly Duncan an' the Archibalds. Get 'em to Fort Union. Valiente will take you there. He thinks a heap of you an' yore takin' that scalp when he handed it to you just topped it all off. You want to keep that scalp."

Brower made no answer for a moment and Tom thought that the parson was about to refuse his request. Then, slowly, the big man answered. "I had planned to go to California to work among the miners," he said. "Now I see that I am not called to that field. My work is here. I have killed men and I have sinned against my Lord, and in atonement I must spend my life among these savages."

"You can help 'em, Parson," Tom said eagerly. "With you staying with 'em, the Navajo will be quiet. They won't take sides an' they'll maybe keep the Comanche an' the Apaches in line. You're a heap big medicine man, a Scalpin' Parson. If you'll only. . . ." Tom Armand stopped abruptly, shocked at the look of pain that spread across the parson's stern face.

"A Scalping Parson," Brower said quietly. "So be it, Tom. I will stay and I will do what I can toward keeping the Navajo from going to war. I. . . ." He broke off.

TOM ARMAND nodded slowly. "It's a big man's job," he said. "I reckon you're man enough to handle it, Parson. Now I'll talk to Valiente." Turning he looked at the Navajo chief. Valiente's little beady eyes were bright and questioning.

"This man," Tom said slowly, in Spanish, "is a big medicine man. You saw him kill Bold Man. Bold Man's scalp is at his belt. He is a friend of the Navajo. He has made medicine. His medicine says that you must stay at this camp until tomorrow. He will stay with you. The Navajos are his brothers and he will live with them. *Sabe?*"

Valiente nodded. *"Yo entiendo,"* Valiente answered soberly. "He is strong. His medicine is strong. The Navajos are his children."

"He'll stick with you," Tom told John Brower. "Keep 'em in line, Parson. An' if I don't get back, good luck to you."

"God be with you, Tom," John Brower said earnestly.

"An' you'll look after Molly?" Tom sought some final measure of assurance.

"I'll look after her," the parson promised.

Tom got up. The wound ached and his

head throbbed dizzily. "I'll go then," he said. "Miguel an' I got a ride to make."

Gravely then he shook hands with the parson, with Valiente, and with two or three of the lesser Navajo leaders. Then, turning, he strode off to where Miguel was saddling horses. The Navajos had picked up some of the loose Comanche horses and from these Miguel had selected and commandeered two of the best. Half way to Miguel, Tom stopped. Molly Duncan was coming toward him.

"You are going?" the girl asked gravely.

"I've got to go," Tom answered.

"You are going to try to stop Shelnor?" The girl's eyes searched Tom's. He nodded.

"Will you come back?" she asked.

"I'll try to come back," Tom answered.

Molly hesitated an instant, then, "I have made a sling for your arm," she said. "Bend down so that I can put it on."

Tom bent his head. The girl, close to him, slipped the sling over his neck and as he stood, head still bent, lifted his arm and placed it in the sling. Her fingers were deft as she worked, adjusting the cloth, and when she finished, she looked up to Tom Armand. Then, simply as a child might make the gesture, the girl raised her lips and touched Tom's own.

"I will be waiting here for you to come back," she said. "I will be waiting with the Parson, Tom."

Color suffused Tom Armand's cheeks. He did not reach out for the girl, desirable as she was. He made no movement but he spoke, low voiced and tense. "An' I'll come back to you, Molly," he promised. "I really will come back." For an instant then they looked into each others eyes and then the girl, turning, walked back to the fire where her aunt stood waiting. Tom Armand walked on to Miguel and the waiting horses.

Miguel had borrowed Caleb Archibald's big pistol for Tom. With his wound, Miguel had forseen that Tom could not use a rifle to advantage. Faithfully he was ready to follow Tom into what seemed a certain death trap, but Miguel was not happy about it. "Me, I theenk we are damn' fools," he announced as Tom came up. "Wa't chance we got weeth Shelnor? We. . . ."

"Maybe we haven't a chance, Miguel," Tom answered, "but there's powder in those wagons. If we could fire it. . . ." He left the words unfinished.

Miguel's eyes brightened. "Mebbe so," he grunted. "Jus' the same I'm not theenking to see Fort Union any more."

"You want to die of old age?" Tom asked gruffly. "Come on?"

Miguel held the horse while Tom mounted. Then, mounting his own animal he looked with gloomy eyes at the camp. The Navajos were standing, staring impassively toward the two mounted men. John Brower towered beside Valiente, his hand raised as though in a benediction. Tom's eyes did not linger on the Navajos or on John Brower. Instead he looked toward the fire where Molly Duncan stood with her aunt. As he watched, Molly raised her hand and waved toward the mounted men, a little half-gesture as though she would have called them back.

"Let's go!" Tom snapped, his voice choking in his throat, and under the pressure of his knees, the captured Comanche horse moved forward.

THE two rode northwest, steadily, with the dusk closing in upon them and the planet Mars, the world of the War God, hanging like a beckoning red lamp in the sky. They did not talk as they rode and under them the horses, trained by their wild owners, fretted at the strange odor of their white riders, and tugged at the rawhide nose bands that held them tight.

"How far?" Miguel asked at length.

"How far will a train go in a day, Miguel?" Tom answered. "They will have reached Rock Point and camped to wait for Bold Man."

"An' Bold Man weel not meet them," Miguel said, and laughed deep in his throat. "I know theese Rock Point, Tom. Eet ees not too far."

It was slow riding through the night. Tom Armand and Miguel La Force, setting their route by the stars, bore steadily west and north. There, west and north, on the great plain that lay to the east of the Sacramentos, was the little spear of rocks that marked their destination. There, either at that rocky point or near it, Josh Shelnor was encamped.

The night grew cold. Somewhere a coyote howled dismally and the wind flicked at yucca and rustled the dead bean pods

dried on the leafless mesquite, and whispered warningly across the grama grass.

In Tom Armand's shoulder the wound throbbed and under him the feet of the Comanche horse set a steady rhythm to the word that went through his brain: "Molly . . . Molly Duncan . . . Molly . . . Molly Duncan. . . ."

"Shees be light in two t'ree hour, Tom," Miguel's prosaic voice broke the meter. "We better find heem before she's light."

"We'll find him," Tom answered. "We've got to find him, Miguel."

There was a faint streak of gray in the sky behind the riders. The wind blew again, colder, a morning breeze across the flats. West of them the hills marched and low against the hills a star shown, red as Mars himself, a star that was not a star but a fire.

"They're up early, Miguel," Tom Armand commented. "See the fire?"

"*Si,*" Miguel answered. "An' now . . .?"

"And now we'll get a little closer an' see what we can do about it," Tom answered grimly.

The eastern gray was not yet rose-lined when Tom and his companion halted their horses. Ahead of them close against the rock point, the fire shown and about the fire the wagons stood, close clustered. There was movement about the wagons for the Shelnor teamsters were up early, setting about their work.

"They're lookin' for Bold Man to come in today," Tom told Miguel. "He didn't get in last night an' so they're expectin' him."

"An' w'at we do now Tom?" Miguel asked pointedly. "W'at kin' of plan we got?"

Tom Armand stared speculatively at the camp. "The wagons are pulled close," he said. "Ain't that a pile of stuff behind the wagons, there against the point?"

"I theenk so."

"If they'd make a park it would of been harder," Tom said. "Suppose somebody got close to the point an' came in on 'em, Miguel? Then what?"

"Then he get keeled," Miguel answered matter-of-factly.

"Not if there was somebody else out there kind of attractin' attention," Tom answered. "What would get a bunch of men all lookin' one way, Miguel?"

"A fight," Miguel suggested quickly.

"Or a fire," Tom said.

Miguel scratched his head. "Grass burn pretty good," he announced. "The weend she's come theese way, Tom."

Tom Armand came to sudden decision. "You ride a circle," he ordered abruptly. "Get up wind. Start. . . . No, by glory! There's their horses, Miguel!"

"An' so w'at?" Miguel said scornfully. "There ees their horses, so w'at we do?"

"We'll run 'em right over the camp," Tom snapped.

"An' . . ?" Miguel waited impatiently for the rest of the details.

"An' we'll come in with 'em!"

"An' . . ?"

"An' we'll set our fire in the middle of the powder wagons," Tom completed. "Let's go!"

Miguel shrugged his shoulders. It was a mad plan, a crazy scheme, so the shrug said, but if Tom Armand wanted to try it, then Miguel was willing.

"Adios," Miguel commented to the prairie round about. "You have been nice worl' to leeve een. I theenk I not see you some more." He turned his horse and followed after Tom.

VI

IT was a mad enough scheme that Tom had suggested. Just mad enough to work. The man night-herding Josh Shelnor's horses had been up all night and was drowsing in his saddle. Very shortly he would be relieved but now. . . . Over at the far side of the grazing horses one animal lifted his head and stared intently. Others joined him. The night guard, watching his charges, circled toward the staring horses. He dropped into a little fold of ground and a man, rising up, smote straight and quick with a clubbed musket. The night guard dropped as though shot and over on the little knoll Tom Armand put down the rag he had been waving to attract the attention of the horses. Miguel had done his part.

Miguel was panting a little when he joined his leader. "I heet pretty hard," he said. "That hombre hee's sleep a while."

"Good," Tom kept his voice low. "Now we'll swing in behind these *caballos* an' start 'em toward the camp. When we get

close, yell like hell an' keep 'em running."

Miguel nodded his understanding and in the shelter of the knoll he and Tom mounted their horses. They circled cautiously and the Shelnor horse herd, tossing their heads, moved in toward the camp.

Falling in behind the horses Tom and Miguel kept them going. They rode low, almost lying on their mounts, the dim but growing light aiding their concealment. In the camp with the wagons behind the fire now, and the rock point making a sort of wing to a V of which the wagons formed a side, Josh Shelnor and his men, sleepy, just awakened, were going about the business of breakfast. They did not notice the moving horses immediately and when they did look up it was too late.

Miguel screeched, tearing the cords from his throat in a high, unearthly scream. Tom Armand's whoop was borrowed from the Comanche, who had learned in some hell of their own. The horses, frightened, increased their speed, broke from trot to lope and then as the demons hung on behind them, from lope to run. Straight down upon the frightened camp they came and men ran like scattering quail from their path.

The leaders recoiled at the mouth of the V, seeking to escape to right and left. Some did so escape but the rest went straight into the trap and with them went Tom Armand, Miguel, recklessly enough, having swung off to the left. It was Tom that followed the horses in.

Inside the V there was confusion, shouts and dust and flying fire from where the horses had gone through the camp. The maddened animals, trying to escape, threshed into the wagons, going through between them, over the tongues, tumbling and falling.

The men, as frightened as the animals, seeking what shelter they could find, under the wagons, atop them, some running blindly into the rock wall. Into that milling turmoil rode Tom Armand. One thing had caught his attention, one think that held his interest. There was one wagon in the center and on it the tarpaulin was partially removed. Exposed were small kegs. Tom Armand knew what was in those kegs and he made toward that wagon.

He had almost reached it when a bearded man coming out of the dust and the milling horses, climbed the wagon wheel. Josh Shelnor reached the safety of the powder wagon and stooped, and Tom Armand, coming alongside the wagon, reached with his good arm and pulled himself from his horse.

For an instant Shelnor did not see the other man on the wagon. He was peering down into the V of the camp, cursing, bellowing orders to his men. "It ain't Injuns," Shelnor yelled. "It's. . . ." He checked. Turning he saw Tom Armand on the wagon with him. With a bellowed curse Josh Shelnor sprang to the attack.

The kegs afforded treacherous footing. Tom Armand met that charge fairly. Shelnor drew his knife and leaped. Tom's knife was in his good hand. If Shelnor came to grips then Tom was lost, crippled, hampered by his wounded shoulder, he would be no match for the charging giant. And so he bent, and Shelnor striking down with his knife, went over Tom's back as Tom lunged in. For an instant there was a tangle of arms and legs atop the powder wagon. Shelnor's stamping feet broke the top of a keg and powder spilled. Men, now that horses had escaped from the V and the pressure within its wings was lessened, were running toward the wagon, and the fighting men.

Tom Armand, with a terrible fire of hell in his shoulder, nerved himself for one final effort. He was against Shelnor, his body against Shelnor's legs, the elbow of his injured arm behind Shelnor's knees. Now he straightened in one mighty upheaval and Shelnor pitched down across him. Instantly the big man came catlike to his feet, lunging in, and as he lunged Tom met him with ready knife.

Josh Shelnor recoiled from the meeting, reeling back, and Tom, dropping the knife, snatched the long pistol from his belt, cocked it and bending, fired the pistol into the loose powder of the broken keg.

INSTANTLY fire flashed up, almost blinding Tom. He dropped flat, rolled from the wagon, struck the ground and scrambling, without getting fully to his feet, ran madly. Behind him the powder fizzed like a fuse and then in one tremendous roar the wagon exploded, flame glaring against the sky, the concussion knocking men flat, sending brands flying.

Some of those burning brands fell upon the other wagons. A tarpaulin began to burn steadily. The grass about the wagons caught fire and whipped by the little wind, the line of flame grew. The wagoners, those that were able, their wits lost in the burst of flame and explosion, ran, putting distance between themselves and destruction. In the wagon upon which the tarpaulin burned there was a minor explosion, a popping as cartridges kept there exploded. Tom Armand, breathless, almost senseless, stopped his scrambling run and lay flat on the ground. Suddenly a horse loomed above him and a rider slid down from the plunging animal.

Once more Tom nerved himself. This was the end. This was the last row in the field. The work was done and only death remained. Then the horseman was bending down. Tom Armand's good shoulder was gripped and he was hauled roughly to his feet and Miguel La Force's voice rasped in his ear.

"*Es todo! Es todo,* Tom. Come. Come!"

Weakly Tom Armand allowed himself to be hauled up, to be shoved up on the rearing horse. His hands grasped the mane, he could feel Miguel mounting behind him, feel Miguel's strong arm wrapped around his body, hear Miguel's shrill yell of triumph, and then the maddened horse was running with his double burden, and Miguel was yelling back insults that went unheard.

A quarter of a mile from the burning train Miguel stopped the horse. He slid down and helped Tom alight. Tom was burned and powder blackened. The wound in his shoulder was bleeding afresh and there was a fresh wound across his back, a clean cut where Shelnor's knife had struck. Behind them the train burned and Miguel, looking back, could see the wagoners bunched together in a little huddle, watching the destruction of their wagons. Loose horses roamed at will and Miguel, lowering Tom to the ground, mounted and loped away.

He returned presently leading a horse, the saddled animal that had been ridden by the night guard. From the wagons the men were moving now, out toward Miguel and Tom. Day had come and the sun was peeping over the eastern rim of the world.

"Come Tom," Miguel bent down and shook his companion gently. "*Pronto. Pronto!* These mens are mad. They are wild after us, Tom."

Tom Armand roused a little. He helped Miguel as that stocky man bent and pulled, getting Tom to his feet. He was able, with help, to reach the saddle. Miguel wasted no time. He flung himself upon his horse, caught the reins of Tom's mount and leading him, rode west. From the group of wagoners smoke spouted and a bullet whined above Tom Armand and Miguel. Looking back Miguel La Force added the last ignomy to the defeat: Placing his broad thumb to the tip of his nose, he waggled his fingers.

"Goo'bye, gentlemen." He cried, then laughed mockingly.

At noon beside a little stream, Miguel stopped and cared for his companion. He bathed Tom Armand's blistered face with cold water and he bandaged the wounds afresh, first dressing them with cuds of tobacco which he chewed for the purpose. Miguel, like all others, had his sovereign remedies.

That evening the Navajos and the Archibalds, camped below a knoll, saw a man come riding in, leading a horse upon which was a pack. The Navajos went out to meet the arrival and found that the rider was Miguel La Force and the pack Tom Armand. The Navajos brought them in. At the camp they laid Tom Armand on the ground and Molly tried vainly to suppress her tears while Grace Archibald bustled about, marveling, loudly, that Tom was not dead, what with cuds of tobacco on his wounds and all; and Miguel, weary, almost ready to drop for want of sleep, spoke to Parson Brower.

"Esure," said Miguel, "we feex that train. Theese Tom he's keel Josh Shelnor. Hee's steek heem weeth a knife lak you steek Bold Man. But Tom don't get hees scalp lak you get Bold Man's. Then we set theese powder on fire and she's blow up. Boom! an' then we leave. Sure we feex that Shelnor."

"And Tom?" Brower asked quickly. "What. . . ?"

Miguel shrugged. "Tom's she's tough," he assured. "He's get well. I'm gon' sleep!" And with that Miguel La Force lay down on the ground and soon was slumbering soundly.

THERE is little to tell of the march north. The Navajos went with the Archibald wagon because Parson John Brower went with it. Valiente and his Navajos believed in the medicine of John Brower, believed implicitly. Behind them, somewhere west of the Pecos, the scattered remnants of Josh Selnor's party made their way to Franklin, and at the Rock Point the buzzards circled and dropped down into the charred grass, and at night coyotes feasted.

Below Fort Union the Navajos dropped away, first receiving Parson Brower's promise that he would rejoin them. John Brower and Tom Armand had talked on that long march, discussed facts and details and arrived at a decision.

The parson's work lay with the Navajo, he knew it and Tom Armand saw it. But before he went to that task there was another for John Brower to perform. This he did in the office of the Commandant at Fort Union, with the officers clustered about, and Valiente and a number of the Navajo braves squatting against the wall. There in that office, with Miguel supporting him because he was still weak, and with all the world looking on, Molly Duncan and Tom Armand were united in marriage and John Brower's face was solemn as he pronounced his blessing over them.

Valiente had brought the word of the fight at the knoll. Miguel had added his bit. Throughout Fort Union, John Brower had become, "The Scalping Parson." Amplified and embellished that tale was to cover the Territory.

Later, when Tom Armand marched away with Major Paul and the Colorado Column to meet and defeat the Southern Army in Glorietta Pass, and so forever end the western aspirations of the Confederacy, John Brower was with the Navajo. Throughout the long and weary years that followed '64, he stayed with them. His influence, and the strength of Kit Carson, held the Navajo in check while wild warfare flamed on the western plains, while Custer died and Crook subdued the Apache and, in Texas, the Rangers combatted the last of the once powerful Comanche raiders.

And when he was an old, old man, in his ranch house on the Cimarron, Molly Duncan's grandchildren clustered at Tom Armand's knee and begged for a story of the wild old days. Tom Armand, with his arms about small shoulders and his eyes looking into the glowing embers in the fireplace, would tell that story, the one that was always demanded: the story of the early days, and Grandmother and the Scalping Parson.

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Riders of Destiny

By THOMAS J. COOKE

"Like sire, like son—" and wolf-blood flowed in the veins of dark Bib Nations. Yet when the red dawn struck, when the thin barrier of Tejano long-guns gave under De Luz's sabre thrust, then the bleak-eyed youngster proved that renegade blood sometimes carries the golden spark of glory.

"BLOOD is thicker'n water an' a hell of a lot hotter'n co'n whiskey!"

So spoke Sagebrush Jones, unofficial prophet of the Silver Dollar bar. He wasn't talking of the blood that had been spilled in the ebb and flow of Mexican-Tejano battle tides, nor yet of the waters of the Rio Bravo del Norte that winds its

snaky way around the Big Bend country It was his judgment on the heritage of little Bib Nations, whelp of Old Wolf Nations, who had eaten Ranger lead while hazing wet steers across the Rio at Lechugon. Little Bib, brother of Aussie Nations who had swung for the murder of Ranger Yippy Yoss near Boquillas. And brother of Nic Nations, for whom many men had already named a bullet.

Nobody ever took the preachings of Sagebrush Jones seriously. But the old swamper had an uncanny way of hitting close to the truth. Of calling the turn of the cards of life. He spat now, and eyed his listeners challengingly.

"Take a lobo whelp, hand nurse 'im, pet 'im an' feed 'im man chuck. Yeah, an' raise 'im up with a pack uh ketch dawgs . . . What yuh got then? A dawg? Mebby, till the moon gits full. Then look fer the critter on some butte, a-bellerin' at the stars like no dawg ever teached 'em. Then watch 'im belly along some cow trail an' pull down a yearlin' heifer. I'm tellin' you —watch this young Bib Nations."

Ranger Captain Lute Jackman shifted his fine cut.

"If a dog yapped about that lobo like yo're talkin' 'bout Bib Nations, I don't blame the critter fer goin' bronc," he said. "That kid's alone in the world an' strugglin' ag'in' a handicap greater'n me an' you'll ever know. Lay offen him. Give 'im his chancet tuh come clean."

That was some speech for the taciturn old lawman and, in a way, it made history in the Rio country. First, it instinctively prejudiced him in the kid's favor. Second, it got to the ears of a half-wild youngster and planted in his love-starved heart the seed of a strange and terrible friendship.

Funny how a simple rebuke should affect the lives of so many . . .

CAPTAIN LUTE JACKMAN first met Bib Nations in the Rio bosque after Manuel Pradero had murdered a dirt farmer outside Sacate and run away with his girl wife. The killer was a wolf and an adept at covering his tracks. Baffled aftre a brief hunt, convinced that Pradero had taken his victim into Mexico, the lawman had camped for the night in the bottom-land brush jungles.

Out of the night had come Bib Nations.

The boy bestrode an undersized pinto, was clothed in rags. His calloused feet, bare save for a pair of rusty spurs, were virgin to the touch of bootleather. His fuzz-covered face was gaunt from lack of proper food, his coal-black hair a mop that dusted slender shoulders.

To the lawman, these things were unimportant beside the more vital characteristics—eyes and mouth. The eyes shone with wild inner fires, windows of a soul white-hot with a spirit that might flame for great glory—or shame. His mouth was straight, a bit hard, yet breaking easily into a kid grin.

"I know the stripe," thought Lute Jackman to himself. "An' it's the kind that Texas breeds to be her Rangers. An' yuh gotta ketch 'em young tuh gentle 'em."

What he said aloud was—" 'Light, belly-rustler and shove up tuh the fire. Don't yore mammy worry 'bout her boy bein' up late thisaway?"

The youngster flung himself down.

"Ain't got no mammy," he said soberly. "My daddy was killed by the Rangers an' my big brother was hung fer beefin' one. Me an' night is friends an' I travels most when human skunks is abed. Is Pradero a-rangin' on the loose yet?"

Lute nodded, appraising the boy. "I reckon mebby he's swum the Rio by now!"

"You reckon?"

The lawman detected irony in the lad's tone, noted him glance scornfully at the 'breed tracker who dozed at the edge of firelight.

"Why don't yuh git yorese'f a tracker that kin foller a trail?" the boy said, after a brief pause.

That brought a smile. "I've bin a-lookin' fer one fer twenty-odd year, son."

"Well . . . !" In the boy's eyes was a challenge. "You've done found 'im, Mister!"

That's how Bib Nations, whelp of the Wolf, hooked up with the Rangers. Under a tawny Texas moon, Lute took the boy to the killer's tracks. Like a hound, he ferreted out the murderer's back-tracking play, followed a new trail for a few hundred yards, then lit out like heel flies were galling him. Jackman and the 'breed followed skeptically.

He led them to Pradero's hideaway in

a mean jacal where the killer slept, rested against the dawn.

That was his first case, the first of many, where, by his uncanny ability to read trail sign, Bib Nations helped the Rangers maintain the traditions of the Force. Frequently he was called far from Sacate range to pick up cold man-sign. A born manhunter, he had about him a quiet something that made men respect him, that made men fear what he might become. Was it that his destiny was written in those slitted gray eyes for all men to read?

When, two years after meeting Lute Jackman, Bib was inducted into the Rangers as a tracker, none was half as pleased as the old lawman himself. The boy was his. He'd seen him and made him. Tracker Nations would make a Ranger that Texas might well be proud of.

Whelp of the wolf . . . bah!

LIKE the jagged flame that rips from lowering storm clouds, trouble broke at the Big Bend in the short barranco country, where the Chinati Mountains turn the Rio southward. This time it was a new raider, a ruthless killer calling himself the Comanche Kid.

Across miles came the message from far Austin. Captain Jackman should organize a patrol looking up to the man's extermination.

The Ranger captain established camp on a little bench overlooking the Rio and threw his manhunters down the killer's trail. It led into Mañana-land. It was Tracker Nations who showed them the hardpan crossing where plenty wet cattle had been crossed. Nor had the youngster the least doubt that it would be he who led them to the outlaw hideaway below the border.

But Lute Jackman thought differently.

"Not this time, son," he said. "I'm figgerin' big things fer you, an' one of 'em ain't gittin' killed off before yore horns has sprouted. Git on back tuh watch the camp. I'm holdin' you an' Rye Carter responsible. If I want yuh, I'll send word."

Muttering, eyes blazing, Bib flung about, spurred furiously for the camp. In his eyes were tears of disappointment and rage. His heart seethed with rebellion; his wild blood pounded at the slight. What he could not understand was the old lawman's fatherly interest, his desire to spare the boy the dangers of invading a lawless range.

At the camp were only Ranger Rye Carter, nursing an infected instep, and Quince Cotton, black cook, who had fought Comanches with the old Tenth Cavalry until they had broken his heart by declaring him too old.

"Why, a niggah ain't nevah too ol' tuh fight," was the black man's plaint. "Never till he cain't unwrop hisself from de hawss fixin's afteh ridin' seventy-five miles froo de weatheh. Brotheh, she's sho' a crool world fer a fightin' man what can't git hisself a fight!"

There the three of them held the Ranger camp. And there the ball started rolling.

Rarely indeed does a Ranger break regulations, but Rye Carter was crazed with pain of his infection, careless then of any law. He knew that Captain Jackman would be gone for two days. What harm to ride to Presidio, secure medical attention, have a few drinks and be back with no one the wiser? A man of action, he saddled up. He said adios to Bib and Quince, told them to look for him when they saw him, and rode.

Ten minutes later—

The black cook, busy at his dutch ovens, startled Bib with his sudden call. He leaped up to see five dusty, grim-jawed hombres who paused at the ford to water their broncs. Something about the way their tall leader sat his inky stallion told the tracker this was no other than the Comanche Kid.

"Quince," he said, watching them cross to the south, "throw kaks on them two fast broncs. We're forkin' a war trail, me an' you!"

"Amen, brotheh!" The cook was racing for the corral, sheddin' cap and apron. "I'm girdin' on ma armah, takin' up de fiery sword an' somebody goin' tuh die. Hallelujah!"

ACROSS the Rio.

Through the gloom of starlit barrancas where breezes whispered softly, *"Quidado!* To go farther is death!"

Past phantom sahuaros, arms uplifted in prayer for gringo invaders, the two rode. Bib Nations in the lead, Quince

Cotton behind. All that night they pushed on steadily until the first flush of dawn came streaking into the endless mesquite forest. Then . . .

"Reach!" A hard voice from the thickets. "High an' pronto!"

The black man cursed softly. Bib Nations laughed, but his eyes burned and his fingers twitched as they went aloft. The tall *Americano* they had seen before eased from his covert, bandoliers clicking. From all sides the brush spewed half bare, heavily armed Indios, dark and sullen.

Bib laughed again. "Ambushed," he snarled. "An' by Injuns—Yaquis!"

"That ain't no lie, amigo," said the white man. "What was you expectin'—purty señoritas?"

Bib started, eyed the man narrowly in the growing light.

"Nic!" he half shouted. "Nic Nations, yuh ol' saddle bum! Don't yuh know me?"

The man stepped closer, peered unbelievingly.

"Bib! *Hermano!*" He struck the tracker's palm. "Shore I know yuh—now. What yuh doin' down thisaway?"

"Lookin' fer the Comanche Kid—ain't we, Quince?"

"Bib said somethin', Misteh. Yes, suh!"

The man eyed them frostily. "Well, yuh've done found 'im, button. What about it?"

"You . . . Nic?" Bib recoiled, rasped an unpleasant laugh. "Whelp uh the Ol' Wolf, eh? Wolves has a way uh comin' tuh trap, Nic!"

The man ignored the warning. "I heard you was ridin' law trail, Bib. Struck me funny . . . a Nations doin' thataway. Set me tuh thinkin', too. Mebby I'll have tuh cross guns with my kid brother some day. You aimin' tuh shoot tuh kill when that day comes, button?"

Blood ebbed from Bib's face. He suddenly remembered Sagebrush Jones. "That day ain't never comin'. Blood's thicker'n water!"

A Yaqui loped up, gruffed a warning. Nic turned swiftly to his brother.

"Adios, kid," he said quickly. "Too many lawmen in Cheewawa fer their own good. Tell 'em they's plumb lucky tuh be livin'. See yuh some more!"

Like wraiths the man and his Yaquis melted into the mesquite. In the barranca, sudden stillness. Bib and Quince stared at each other.

Tell *who* they're plumb lucky?

SPLASH of water as something forded the stream. The two went toward the sound and around a bend in the trail they came to a shallow crossing of the wide Conchos River. Grizzled Lute Jackman was just making the west bank when he spotted Bib and Quince. He halted, wet to the hips, watching them come on. His wet Rangers clustered about him.

"Thought I told you to stay in camp!" he clipped. "Where yuh goin'?" There was unrelenting hostility in his tone.

Anger flamed in Tracker Nations. For a long time the old man's severity, his adherence to regulations, had chafed the youngster. Sure he'd left camp against orders. Yet he'd done no more than any good lawman would have done. If he'd brung in Comanche, the old man'd uh hailed him as a hero. As it was, he was a rebel.

"Hunting me a Mex fer breakfast!" he said acridly. "Seen one?"

"I'm lookin' at worse than one, now!" rasped the angry lawman—and it was not until then that Bib noted that the Rangers were all weaponless as well as being unhorsed. He had no way of knowing that those same Yaquis who had been with the Comanche Kid had crept into the Ranger camp and stolen horses, guns and ammunition.

"I'm lookin' at a yella dawg, Nations," Captain Lute Jackman said. "A disgrace to the Force who needs discipline. Put his own rope on him, boys!"

A rope! Bib's wild blood erupted, flared, as they stepped forward to execute the order. Then his Colt's was out and he and Quince were slowly backing their mounts. The weary Rangers stood there, grinning foolishly.

"Not this time, hombres," Bib Nations clipped. "I'd hate tuh kill a Ranger but I'm drillin' the first man that moves thisaway!"

Then he and the black man had scaled the low bank and were galloping southward. . . .

That was a long, bitter walk for Lute Jackman and his fighting Texans. They hit their camp before noon the next day

to find it empty—looted of all horses, arms and ammunition. Captain Lute's anger at that was as nothing compared to his ire when Rye Carter loped into camp in the dusk, maudlin drunk. Then the Ranger chief really erupted. Sick and whiskey-weak, Rye stumbled from Lute Jackman's tent after the ordeal. He reeled toward his horse.

Behind him the old lawman raged—

"—an' yo're a yella hound, false to yore trust, untrue to yore oath. The Rangers ain't made uh that stripe. There ain't no place in the Force fer yore kind. Take yore choice. Either shake Texas dust offen yore feet or face charges!"

The drunken man flung about. "Tuh hell with you an' yore Rangers—both! Lute Jackman an' his discipline—bah! You make me sick an' when the sign is right, I'll show yuh what I think uh the Rangers!"

Lute Jackman watched him cross the Rio, and his mouth was grim. Others, deep in hidden coverts below the border, watched the renegade Ranger ride southward with slitted and wondering eyes.

THROUGH a window that gave onto the wide plaza of Trocado, Bib Nations only half hearkened to the talk of the Comanche Kid and the jokes of Quince Cotton. He looked out upon a waiting and expectant throng of bandoleroed men. Nic Nations was talking.

"De Luz—Candelario De Luz is a top-hand at war talk. He's leadin' a revolution and calls hisself the Light of Mexico! Him an' me handled wet cattle together an' he's done made me a general . . . General Naciones."

"Hot damn!" Quince Cotton was on his feet, his spine stiff, hand flashing in the flat salute of the old Tenth. "General, suh! Co'poral Cotton repo'ts de enemy in full retreat, suh. Requests yo' o'dehs, suh, to put 'em to de sabeh."

"Atta stuff, black boy," the outlaw chuckled. "I've done fixed it fer Bib tuh be a capitan. You'll be a corporal with a nice purple uniform."

The negro's face split in a monstrous grin.

Bib snorted. "Don't count me in. I can't hand-nurse a mass uh stinkin' Spics without wantin' tuh take scalps—their scalps."

"Me, too, *hermano mio*." Nic Nations let the smoke of his cigaret funnel through his nostrils. "That's why I had the Big Bull c'ral me with the Yaquis. He fears 'em an' with good reason. They bin fightin' the Mex fer three hundred year, an' winnin'. They're even killin' 'em now, right here in this camp, with cold steel. Give those Yaquis time an' they'll plumb rub out what De Luz calls his Army of Liberty."

"How come he plays with rough hombres like that?" Bib asked curiously.

"He's wise. Moquitor, the Yaqui chief, is sore at the President. Figgers tuh square it up by fightin' fer De Luz. It gives 'im a open season on Mex, savvy? I git along fine with the Indios an' they like me. They'll like you, too. When we win—"

"Suppose we don't?" clipped Bib.

The Comanche Kid cracked his knuckles. "We won't be carin' . . . we'll be dead! If we win, there'll be big haciendas, lots uh mazuma, purty señoritas an' more cows than there is in Texas. Sound good?"

Bib grunted. There was no kick to the lure. In his heart was a dull pain, a hurt that he charged up to bitterness against Lute Jackman. Come a showdown, he'd—

"Look!" cried the Comanche Kid. He pointed to the plaza.

OUTSIDE, excitement was rippling the seraped horde. De Luz, Light of Mexico, strode across the canopied arcade, spurs a-jingle. He was ornate in corded purple uniform with crimson cape bannering out behind him. At his heels came his staff, eagle-eyed officers heavy with guns. Then The Light began to talk. They heard his deep tones striking through the tense breathlessness of his awed followers.

"The Light of Mexico greets you, my children," he thundered. "De Luz, emancipator of the down-trodden peon. God has called me to curb the tyrant's hand, to save Mexico—the empire. Patience, for the day is not afar off."

"Viva!"

"Viva De Luz!"

"Viva Mexico!"

Paisano throats bellowed their fervor. Dark faces, flushed with mescal and cheap whiskey, beamed back at him fanatically

as he passed between their aisles to the quarters of General Naciones. He paused in the doorway, smiled patronizingly, stiffened at the salutes of the strangely assorted three.

"Ah, my General Naciones," he said to Nic. "So these are the two fighters of whom you spoke? *Bueno.* Fighter amigos of yours, my General, are thrice welcome. . . . In the matter of your trip to the border. . . . I have received word. In the dawn after mañana all will be in readiness. Take half your Indios under Moquitor, leaving the remainder with your next in command. My scouts report"—he chuckled malevolently—"that the gringo Rangers have removed their camp, have departed. To humiliate them was better than to kill them and more soothing to the great power to the north. Your task should be easy. Salud!"

When he had gone, the Comanche Kid smoked silently before he satisfied their curiosity.

"Shipment uh ca'tridges," he said tersely. "Comin' to the line on mules. We take it at the Rio. More on the way."

"Boy, howdy!" Quince rubbed his hands raspingly. "Bullets fer guns an' guns fer fightin' men."

Bib grinned. "Shore, Nic. I'll throw in with yuh."

"*Bueno.* Lay aroun' here an' git acquainted. Yo're my next-in-command, Bib, so look over yore Yaquis. Make 'em like yuh an' they'll foller yuh tuh hell an' back."

TIME dragged for Bib Nations in Trocado. Population grew. The place filled rapidly with warriors who stamped impatiently for battle.

Men of many aims, nationalities and colors came to De Luz' banners as the coup drew near. The camp was bedlam uncontrolled.

Among the newcomers was ex-Ranger Rye Carter. All manhood seemed to have deserted the broken lawman. Days on end, he hung about the cantinas, poisoning himself in the raw Mex liquors. Funny the day he met Bib face to face. The tracker was with Quince when Carter reeled up to them, leering at their uniforms.

"Oh, see the purty duds," he scoffed. "What yuh doin'—fightin' fer the Spics? Tracker Nations an' the Ranger cook. . . ."

The old bitterness assailed Bib. Though he could only guess at Carter's mission in Trocado, he admired the man's nerve. And, of course, he guessed wrong. For he figured Carter a spy.

"Don't question me, yuh fool," he said icily. "Yo're foolin' nobody puttin' on that fake drunk. Go back tuh Lute Jackman an' tell 'im that Bib Nations saved his spy. Enter Trocado again an' yuh'll face a firing squad."

Rye Carter drew himself up. He was too drunk to offer explanation.

"Why you—you," he spluttered furiously. "You think yo're better'n me, eh? Yuh whelp uh outlaws an' renegades! You fixed me right by comin' over here an' I ain't fergittin'. Some day I'll kill you, Bib Nations."

"Try it. . . ." Bib's face was dark with hot blood. "Try it now!"

"But don't try it while Co'poral Quince Cotton is watchin'," hummed the big negro.

The Comanche Kid hurried up then, and listened with lowering brows to his brother's anger.

"Yuh best fog it fer the border, feller," he told the ex-Ranger. "You ain't needed here. Bin watchin' yuh. Too much aguardiente. Git goin' . . . tomorra may be too late!"

"Sendin' me out tuh git plugged, eh?" Rye Carter sneered at him.

"Not if yo're the coyote I think yuh," sneered the outlaw. "But, at that, yuh best do yore tallest bellyin'. There's Yaqui scouts betwixt here an' the Rio!"

BIB was asleep when word came that twenty mule loads of cartridges had been seized by Texas Rangers at the border. General Naciones and his Yaquis, the messenger said, had the white lawmen forted up in the rocks. Orders were to speed the remainder of the Yaqui legion, recapture the seized ammunition and return with all men for the impending thrust at Ortego.

They were away in the dawn in the roar of hoofs, jingle of weapons. Banners of dust shrouded their going. And it so happened that Rye Carter, not far along his forced trail, observed their departure, and recognized the straight-backed, youth-

ful figure racing at their head. Trembly from debauch, craving alcohol, fearful of the Yaquis who swarmed between Trocado and the border, he turned tail and went back to the rebel camp. There he heard the tale of the seized ammunition, of the Yaquis riding to wipe out besieged lawmen.

Always an opportunist, his cunning served him now. He talked fast to secure that audience with the Light of Mexico. He talked faster as he painted for the self-styled emancipator the character of Bib Nations, tracker, son of the Old Wolf of the Rio.

"An' now," he wound up, "yuh send him north tuh wipe out these Rangers. Think he'll do it?"

De Luz flicked ash from his perfumed cigaret. "I trouble not the *cobeza* about this gringo capitan. If he fails . . . *pouf!* What is one man?"

"I tell yuh it's a trick!" insisted the renegade. "This capitan is of the Rangers himself. He will lead your men to their deaths an' be laughin' at yuh!"

Candelario De Luz was on his feet, eyes blazing. "Liar! Think you General Naciones would be fooled by a Ranger? Tell me—" he grinned fiendishly—"that *he* is a Ranger!"

"General Naciones! Who . . .?" Rye Carter studied.

"The one men call the Comanche Kid. He who leads my Yaqui legion."

"There yuh are!" The sluggish brain of the ex-Ranger blazed. "Naciones . . . Nations! They are the same. Brothers, sir, whelps uh the Old Wolf. That makes it worse. They're sellin' yuh out, and I'll prove it! Lead yore men to the border and you shall see. I . . ."

"You," the Light gritted stiffly, "shall ride at my side. If it be that you have lied, it shall be my exquisite pleasure to watch you die on the ant hills. *Vamonos!*"

BEHIND fleshy parapets that had once been pack mules, men of iron sagged over rifle stocks, bloodshot eyes glaring desperation. Parched throats clamored in a heat that in two short days had turned edible mule meat to carrion. Water . . . water . . . a river full of it swirling before their tortured vision. Yet it was death to attempt it.

Hemmed in a ring of flame, Lute Jackman and his battling Rangers had taken a terrible toll of the wild horde that bayed them. Of the breed known on the frontier as Long-Guns, they made each shot count though they were flanked by tiers of full cartridge cases.

Even with fall of night there was no rest for them. Heat persisted, radiating from blistering rocks. That interminable *pu-u-u-u-nk* of lead into stiffened carcasses was damnable. And their thirst grew with each passing hour.

Two days of hell—two nights of damnation. No relief in sight. Ranger Tibbetts had tried—it seemed years ago—to creep out for help. His ghastly face leered up at them from the slopes below.

Dawn!

Another hellish sun beating down on Texas stalwarts who knew only how to fight and . . . die. From the south, tortured with writhing heat devils, lifted banners of dust. Lute Jackman's voice sounded hollow, uncanny, his first word in many hours.

"Thank yore Gawd fer small favors, Texans," he muttered. "More uh the devils comin' from hell. More Spic bait for Texas buzzards."

They focused red eyes on the advancing column, saw it reach the Rio, watched men and horses drink. Enemy reinforcements didn't faze these fighting men, but watching them drink drove them almost mad. Screaming hoarsely, shaking his trembling fist, Ranger Boggy Doan weaved upward from a pile of empty shells. Skylined there, he ran rigid fingers through a shock of tawny hair.

"Yuh damn Spic buzzards, I'm goin' through yuh tuh water . . . water. Do you hear me . . . *water!*"

He caught up a canteen. Men clutched at the crazy ranny but he beat their hands away. He leaped the parapet—reeled down that malpais hill.

Guns cracked spitefully. . . . Yaqui guns. And Boggy Doan plunged limply forward like an old ball of clothes to roll swiftly downward in a shower of loose rock. He fetched up against a sahuaro — body twisted and still.

"Gawd," croaked thirst-tortured Mal Evans, who had wiped out the Butcher gang in the Sangres. "There went as good

and as plumb loco a man as ever give his life fer Texas!"

Lute Jackman's rifle gave answer as he opened on suddenly careless targets. Boggy Doan was trying to get up down there. He was up, and his once forgotten pistol was in his hand. Then he was down again as the storm of Yaqui lead drove life from his body.

FROM where they had slaked their thirst at the Rio, Bib Nations and Quince Cotton witnessed that mad charge in stunned disbelief. They had known the Rangers were trapped and doomed to die. But to watch a Ranger—a comrade—die thus . . .

Awful.

The black man holstered and bandaleroed—Quince Cotton of the fighting Tenth—dropped to one knee and covered a sweat-grimed face in his hands.

"Dat was fat Boggy Boy," he said brokenly.

Bib jerked him erect, savagely. "Git on yore hawss. We're goin' tuh stop this."

Bidding his Yaquis hunt the sparse mesquite shade, Bib led the way across the Rio. There he dismounted. Bellying from cover to cover, he and Quince reached a hastily constructed rock wall, where the Comanche Kid and Moquitor waited for the end. Both were jubilant that the rest of the Yaqui legion had come up.

"Drilled 'im nice, didn't yuh?" Bib said dryly, nodding at the two silent forms on the slope.

"Heat loco!" drawled his brother, stretching like a cat. "Mañana they'll *all* be nuttier than a lizzard on a fire-het rock. We'll bear down, come mornin'."

"Fer why?" Bib was grinning. "What yuh want uh them Rangers?"

The man's eyes flickered. "Them ca'tridges," he said, uneasily.

"Uh-huh! Suppose I git them shells. Do the lawmen go free?"

Their eyes clashed. The Comanche Kid looked to the blank, impassive face of Moquitor, then nodded his head.

"Shore."

There was something about the way he said it that made Bib know he lied. Still, it was a chance. If only Lute and his boys had a skinful of water . . . Bib suddenly knew nothing mattered but that.

"*Bueno.*" He caught up a sack that had once held flour and later tortillas. His flag of truce waving over the stony parapet forced a mighty silence to enfold that grim battle ground. From the top of the *loma* a hoarse voice croaked down . . . Lute Jackman!

"What yuh want?"

There was boyish eagerness to Bib's answer. "I want tuh make medicine—cards face up."

"You'll make it up here, feller," the lawman called back, "if yuh make it with me."

He had promised no truce, yet Bib didn't hesitate. Catching up Nic's full canteen, he turned to the bug-eyed negro.

"If any man fires over this white flag, Quince," he said meaningly, "kill 'im!"

He was gone, truce flag flying from a dry ocatilla stalk. Shoulders straight, jaws bulging, he strode confidently up the hill.

THE Texas men lay as they were, red eyed, smiling savage smiles, watching him come up to them. And when their one-time tracker stood in their midst they scourged him silently, shamed him with the suffering that screamed from their eyes.

"Well," Lute Jackman said after a moment. "Spit it out."

Bib flushed before their loathing, their enmity.

"Here, Cap." He unstrapped the canteen, handed it over. "Drink first. The wau-wau will keep!"

The slosh of water drew groans from men who were dying for it.

The old Ranger captain took the vessel, held it a moment, smiling terribly. Then it was hurtling down the hill in a cascade of stones. With a heave Jackman was on his feet, his bearded face in Bib's.

"Where did yuh git the idee Texas men have fergot how tuh die? Do yuh think Crockett an' Bowie an' them boys in the Alamo would uh took anything from the Spics but lead? Yeah, the same way we're takin' yore bounty, yuh Spic—yuh lousy white Spic—yuh renegade . . ."

"That covers the ground," Bib said savagely. "I don't give a damn if yuh never drink water, but how about a swap? Walk out uh here with yore guns an' leave the ca'tridges. D'yuh take it? If yuh don't . . ."

Old Lute gestured helplessly. "The answer's the only one a Ranger knows. Come an' tote us out . . . on a board! An' you —yuh black-hearted traitor—git back to yore Spics! Move! There's ten men here who would die tuh tear yore guts out. Git, before I turn 'em loose."

Trembling with weakness, Lute Jackman sank back. And Bib Nations started down the hill, unafraid of their condemning eyes, unangered at the old lawman's scorn. Yet he palpitated with fear — fear for these men who had been his comrades. Head hung in defeat, he shuffled downward.

The Comanche Kid leered at him. "What'd they say?"

"They fight!"

"Dat's all de ol' coogah knows," muttered Quince Cotton. "An', Lawd he 'pin' me, I wish I was up dere a-fightin' 'longside 'im!"

INTENT upon the truce, neither besieged nor besiegers was aware of dust pillars lifting toward Trocado From a high loma across the Rio, the Light of Mexico and his staff fastened glasses to the north. Rye Carter, renegade Ranger, studied that grisly fort on the Texas side.

"See!" There was triumph in his voice. "He's pokin' up there now—a white flag—water on his back! He's a double-crossin' rat, like I said, an' he's playin' yuh right inter their hands. If yuh want them shells, yuh'll have tuh get 'em yore ownse'f."

De Luz lowered his glasses, convinced, flushed. "It is as you say. I shall have the gringo capitan for my own pleasure—the ammunition for the good of Mexico. *Coronel*—" he turned to his chief of staff —"sound the charge! Loose my eager children to wipe out the gringos! But . . . save the traitor capitan. He is for De Luz —Light of Mexico!"

The thin note of a bugle blared. With mad howls, Mexican cavalry that had been held in leash for weeks, spurred toward the Rio. At the south bank waited half the Yaqui legion. In the mad flush of the charge, the cavalrymen saw before them only the Indios whom their sires had hunted for centuries. Yaquis who barred the way. Somehow—no man could tell why or how it happened—a Mexican carbine flamed and a Yaqui went down. Another shot—and then a hundred more. It was sheer madness.

Narrow eyed, appraising, Bib leaped to the wondering *jefe*—Moquitor.

"They're loco, Chief," he screamed over the din. "We've gotta fight 'em—or die. Savvy?" He lifted his voice up the hill. "Hey, Texas-men! Come on down tuh water an' heat yore guns! We're fightin' with yuh!"

Before he could finish, the Comanche Kid had him, whirled him around. "Yo're crazy. You ain't fightin' with nobody but me. You ain't got no say here, ay-tall!"

"No?" There was a strange tenseness to Bib's gaunt face.

"By Gawd, *no!*"

The outlaw's hand swept to his gun. The murderous blood of the Old Wolf was talking in one whelp and in the other was the sage counsel, the heady training of grizzled Lute Jackman. Bib hesitated, realized too late what Nic, the killer, was about to do. Then his hand, too, flashed in the draw. But before he could pull his weapon, before the weaving barrel of the Comanche Kid had spoken, a gun roared from behind Bib and the outlaw plunged to his face.

Quince Cotton holstered his smoking short gun and streaked for his horse.

BIB went berserk then. Before his eyes, Moquitor threw up his hands, spun downward with Mex lead in his heart. In the shallow border of the Rio, a twisting, writhing agony of horsemen milled. Into that, like a madman raced the erstwhile tracker of the Ranger force, gun loco, shooting to kill.

A trooper jammed a carbine in his ribs, but before he could trigger, a cavalry sabre flashed and the Mexican's head jerked horribly and disappeared. Men gave before Quince Cotton, of the fighting Tenth, sabre flashing, stroking viciously, taking a toll that would have shamed the one who pegged him too old to fight.

Like a man inspired, Bib rallied the faltering Yaquis, awed by the fall of their *jefe*. It was butchery, the fire they ripped into that cone-hatted horse corps of the man who called himself the Light of Mexico.

At the bank was Lute Jackman and his Rangers, alternately dipping water to

parched throats and rocking Winchester levers till barrels seared to the touch. Toward them raced De Luz and his staff, short-guns drawn and flaming. With them was Rye Carter, suddenly sick of what he was, suddenly reborn in a mad moment of remorse.

Above the hell of battle lifted the victorious war-cry of De Luz as he leveled on the sweating Ranger captain. But he reckoned without the renegade, the informer.

Once a Ranger . . . . Rye Carter's Colt's blazed, taking the Light of Mexico center, spilling him into the roiled river tide. What matter that the emancipator's staff filled Rye with lead? What matter his horse plunged to shore to drop his twitching body among the rocks? He was redeemed, glorified.

A bugle shrilled. De Luz was down!

That broke the Mexican charge and they plunged in a riot of fear for the south shore. One by one they were picked off to cascade down the Rio and the few survivors were prey to rabid Yaquis, ripping after them for a wipe-out.

Like a flash of light it started. In just that same way it was all over.

Unhorsed, Quince Cotton reeled to the shore. Wet with water and blood. He was still wading when he threw up that bloody saber and cried to the heavens.

"Lawd . . . Lawd! It am de pillah of fiah. Take yo' fightin' man!"

Then he was down, drifting. Bib got him to shore but the spirit of the black man had fled. Wounded, sorrowing, Bib reeled away from that cursed spot. Dimly he heard the thin cry that came from the rocks above.

"Bib!" it called. "Bib boy!"

He saw the one called Comanche Kid crawling on his belly, his eyes pitiful, arm uplifted. Nic Nations whose dream of glory was forever shattered.

"Bib boy! Little brother!"

Bib went to him, dropped to his knees to comfort a dying man. From a few yards distant, the waving head of Rye Carter came up. The renegade ranger's eyes were already glazing in death. But there was still savvy there and he saw the black pistol snake out of the holster of Nic Nations. It was his warning scream that drew Bib's attention.

And even as he saw and recognized Carter, Bib Nations, range waif, tracker, renegade and Texan, died with his brother's ball in his heart.

A clock-tick behind the fatal shot, Rye Carter's pistol bellowed. The Comanche Kid shuddered, his tigerish face twisted. Throwing up his weapon in his last conscious effort, he triggered. And Rye Carter died with his boots on.

Weak, too shaken by his trial to prevent the tragedy he saw, Lute Jackman staggered forward with a belly full of water and a gun in his hand. But when he got there it was all over for the three of them.

GONE is Sacate, that Rio town existing on the bounty of those who trafficked in wet cattle. Gone is Trocado, where the mad hopes of a dreamer flared like a comet, then flickered into oblivion. Vanished from the desert's face, they are forgotten, crumbled, peopled only by ghosts of the past.

But the Ranger Force still lives and its courage, its watchfulness, its guns, still are tradition along the Rio Bravo Del Norte. And deep in the Big Bend is still that hidden, hardpan ford where the troopers who followed the Light of Mexico invaded Texas soil. Where the muddy waters of the Rio ran red. Where rangers are still alert to forays of the lawless.

And should you pass that way, watch for the first Ranger that rides past that spot. You will, no doubt, see him dismount, stand at the foot of a giant saguaro, hat off, head bowed as if in prayer. That would be the cactus stalk against which Boggy Doan crashed in his death roll. Pay no attention to its grimness, its frowning sentinelship. That great cactus has seen a heap of water flow down the Rio, a mighty toll of blood taken, and many breeds and kinds of men pass by.

Go to the foot of that saguaro and there you will find a shaft of native basalt, erected by Lute Jackman and his rangers. Laboriously you may trace the chiseled words, half erased by time and the elements. . . .

DIED HERE
TRACKER, BIB NATIONS
RANGER, BOGGY DOAN
RANGER, WEN TIBBETTS
RANGER, RYE CARTER
COOK, QUINCE COTTON
TEXANS!

John Slaughter—

Two-Gun Nemesis of the Tombstone Badmen

By FRANKLIN REYNOLDS

TOMBSTONE *had been* a tough town! Tombstone *was* a tough town! Geronimo and his warriors had been somewhat gentled, if not actually tamed. Wyatt Earp and his squad of shotgun killers had departed for California and other climes. John Ringo, the Shakespearean scholar and lightning-fast gunfighter, had been buried. Men had almost ceased to speculate on what had happened to Curly Bill Brocius. The silver mines were being closed.

Verily, the day of the desperado was passing. At last the hard-working people, the substantial and responsible citizenship was coming into its own. Prosperity was being built on a solid foundation of plain, everyday, matter-of-fact business. The people were establishing churches, homes and schools. The mining town in the heart of the cattle country was witnessing the fading of the red lights before the serene glow of altar candles.

But law was yet mingled with lawlessness. While pastors expounded the gospel, outlaws died in the shadows of the churches. Sunday schools were being held next door to the habitations of the scarlet sisters. Women on their journeys to the meetings of the Missionary Society walked down the streets never beyond earshot of the clicking of poker chips.

Tombstone, where desperadoes, outlaws, gamblers, men of the professions, merchants, cattlemen, thieves, rich men and poor men, mingled in the saloons on every footing of social equality, in unfeigned friendship or smoothly and silently, or openly and notoriously antagonistic and envious of the favors bestowed by some lady on some other admirer, was almost, in a word, The Reno of Yesterday.

Hence this story of a small black-eyed, black-bearded, weather-tanned man of oak and stone courage, grim-lipped determination and frequently demonstrated ability with a six-shooter, a pearl-handled six-shooter, if you please! Hence this story of the memorable years, 1886-1890, that were the dividing line of time between the fires of hell in Tombstone and law and order in Tombstone. Hence this story of John Slaughter, who nearer than any other approached being the original American G-man!

JOHN SLAUGHTER had been born in Louisiana but had sought out the Texas frontier in time to round out his years of maturity in fighting Comanches. He was a solider in the army of the Confederate States and later a Texas Ranger in those days when there were but two kinds of Rangers—"the quick and the dead."

As a young man he entered the cattle business. The railroads were bringing the Eastern markets to the Western plains. Cattle, almost overnight, increased in value from a few to many dollars a head. He took his herds up the *Trail* to Abilene, to Wichita, to Dodge City. He gambled and fought and drank and did everything that other cowboys did in the trail-end towns. To get there he repulsed Indians, braved flooded rivers, starved, sweated, cursed, killed outlaws and swore he would never make another trip. With it all, through it all, he remained a man's man of character, courage and integrity.

Down in Southwestern Texas lived a badman who, in that country of badmen, was something of an outstanding killer. His name was Gallagher and it was in Gallagher's section of the country that Slaughter was engaged in gathering a trail herd. With some of his boys to back his play Gallagher rode into Slaughter's herd, just as he had ridden into other herds, and claimed about three hundred of Slaughter's best longhorns for his own.

This was a regular practice of the badman. Before his ferociousness, in answer to his loud demands and flourished guns,

A pearl-handled Colt's was John Slaughter's special deputy and posse. Lone-handed he gun-whipped the toughest territory in the lead-blistered Southwest. And when this two-bit sized lawman finally shelved his star, the only lobos left within a hundred miles were the quiet breed that bunked in Boothill.

cattlemen had trembled and had, in fear of their lives, acquiesced. To him they had surrendered the best of their herds and had gone along their trails muttering, "Well, it could've been worse." It was said of Gallagher that he had killed many men in Montana and Wyoming. That he *had* killed men in Texas was well known, even to John Slaughter, the man who carried the pearl-handled six-shooter.

"So you claim my cattle, do you?" Slaughter asked him.

"Hell, no!" came the roaring answer. "I'm in here gettin' my cattle that you've taken!"

"Gallagher, you're a damned liar and a damned thief," Slaughter told him. "Yonder is a trail away from here. Take it or take the trail to hell that I'll set you on and be damned fast about making up your mind just which trail you'll take!"

Gallagher was a big man in every way. It was no trouble for him to laugh at a smaller man, or even, sometimes, at a man as large as himself. But there was *something* at which he could not laugh. That *something* was in the eyes of John Slaughter. They were penetrating eyes, brightly black. Just the sort of eyes that Gallagher did not want looking at him—across a gun barrel. He hesitated, perhaps fascinated by those eyes with depths so deep and profound he could not penetrate their message.

"Then it'll be the trail to hell!" Slaughter determined for him in a low, throaty voice, at the same time dropping his hand to the pearl.

"I'm goin'," Gallagher saved his life by saying, at the same time wheeling his horse and riding away. For the first time in his life he had met a man he feared. Others were to enjoy or abhor the experience as the years rolled on.

Gathering his herd, Slaughter moved northward to the Las Vegas market. On the drive he bedded the herd down one night at the *Bosque Grande Rancho* of John Chisum, a ranch made doubly famous because it was on this range that Billy the Kid held his first job as a cowboy killer.

Not impeded with a herd, Gallagher reached this country ahead of Slaughter. When he learned of the arrival of the Slaughter herd, he mounted a fine white horse and rode in the direction of the chuck wagon of the man who wouldn't let him steal cattle. Gallagher was armed with a shotgun loaded with buckshot, or *blue whistlers* as they were better known in those days, and two six-shooters.

If Gallagher was outstanding as a badman on this occasion, he outstood himself as a fool. Slaughter saw him coming, recognized him and picked up a Winchester rifle. The cattleman stood on a hillside alone with the rifle so close to his side that Gallagher failed to see it. Popping his spurs to the white horse, he rode rapidly toward the man he planned to kill. He proposed to get as close as he could as soon as he could to his intended victim.

The ex-Ranger, ex-Indian fighter, displayed a definite speed that greatly surprised his enemy. The two were within rifle range but six-shooters and shotguns at that distance were perfectly harmless. Slaughter pulled the Winchester to his shoulder and with the first shot spilled the white horse and rider into a scramble of gravel and a cloud of dust. The animal had taken a slug between the eyes.

Gallagher came out of the mess to his feet, discharged the shotgun in the general direction of Slaughter and came on running. He drew one six-shooter and a slug from the Winchester broke his arm. He drew his other belt gun. Then Winchester bullets tore through his chest. Slaughter was with him to the finish. Just before he died Gallagher said:

"I knowed better. I didn't have no business with that shotgun. I needed a rifle."

ON that drive John Slaughter battled rustlers more than once and always won. Usually he went into the fights alone. It was ever characteristic of him that he would dare any odds.

"Me and my Winchester," he would chuckle, "we're match for any twenty."

Learning that he could not be separated from his cattle through theft, a group undertook to out-general him with legal action. In this, too, they were defeated because, lo and behold, Slaughter, with his gun in his hand, refused to allow the sheriff to approach near enough to serve the process of court! All this happened in a country where and when John Slaughter knew the only way he could get justice

would be to blaze it out for himself with that pearl-handled six-shooter!

Arizona was a wild desolate land in 1880. The few white settlers in the Territory lived in small communities. The climate was pleasant and extremely agreeable for raising cattle. Fear of the Apaches had kept the cattle and cattlemen out of the valleys and from the hills that made up one of the finest cattle countries on the face of the earth. Slaughter had visited the country two years before. By day and by night he had dreamed of pioneering in the cattle business there.

So it was that one spring he began the long drive across the *Llano Estacado* or Staked Plains of Texas, beyond the Pecos, toward Tularosa. Here he paused just long enough to fall in love, get married and mingle his father-in-law's herd with his own. With his bride's family he pushed on—the sweet aroma of Texas longhorns blazing a honeymoon trail into the land of the setting sun.

Wagon after wagon loaded with household goods, with provisions, with lumber and rifles and cartridges and whiskey, followed the thousands of cattle, the two-score riders, day by day plunging deeper and deeper into an unknown and dangerous country.

John Slaughter and his wagon train, his herd, his riders, filed into the San Simon, the Sulphur Springs, the San Pedro Valleys, there in the land of the Dragoons and Shiricahuas. He had been three long, hot, dry, sweaty months on the trail. At the end he established a home and founded an empire of beef!

Back to Texas, he sent for three more herds of cattle. Into Mexico he rode, buying yet more cattle. Soon he owned more cattle than had been in all Arizona Territory before he arrived. Markets were available. There were many government contracts to be filled at Army posts and Indian agencies. Stories of his fabled and fabulous wealth were told and retold and lost nothing in the telling except resemblance to the truth.

He was rich. All men knew that, and so all insisted that upon his person he carried great sums of gold and negotiable paper. Arizona outlaws became intensely interested in him, five of them particularly, and so one afternoon when in a buckboard he was leaving Charleston with Mrs. Slaughter, without thinking they had by their actions aroused his suspicions, these five men made their plans to rob him. On the drive he handed the reins to Mrs. Slaughter and rode with his shotgun across his lap. At a spring when he anticipated the robbery was scheduled to take place he looked around and learned that he was several hundred yards ahead of the bandits. The next day he confronted one of them, Ted Lysle.

"You planned to hold me up yesterday," Slaughter said to the astonished outlaw. "That's the last time you'll have a chance to pull that trick on me!"

"Don't kill me!" Lysle pleaded, "I ain't got no gun."

"No," Slaughter answered, "but you've got a horse and you've got thirty minutes. I'm giving you that thirty minutes to get your horse and get out of the country with the understanding that you're never coming back!"

Lysle left. In less than a month Slaughter had hunted up the other four bandits and had driven them, too, out of the country under the same terms.

NUMBERLESS were the times when he rode on the trail of rustlers and very forcibly and often violently took back horses and cattle that had been stolen from him. Many of the thieves boasted they would even the score by killing him at the first opportunity. Several ambushes were undertaken and always that uncanny sense of danger that seemed to enshroud him sounded its warning—just in time. Often he alone rode from a trap that had been set for him.

His wealth increased and incidental to it the admiration and esteem of his fellow ranchers increased. Without fear or favor, asking no quarter and certain not to give any, he battled for his home, his life, his property. He decided he had a right to live in peace and if violence was necessary to establish that peace he was willing, ready and able to resort to that necessary violence. He was living in a land where life was cheap, where men jested with death and where they did not honor, did not even recognize, the existence of organized law and order.

Twenty thousand were the people in

Tombstone. Mainly these were the soldiers of fortune—men and women, derelicts, killers, outlaws gathered from the four corners of the earth by the lure of easy riches. Men and women who had changed names about as often as they drifted from town to town, range to range, all quite willing to be lost where one's past *was one's past* and nothing more. Gambling dens, saloons, dance halls were everywhere running full blast no less than twenty-four hours a day.

Gun-fights were commonplace, dead men were no more unusual than living ones. Thousands upon thousands were the dollars that exchanged hands nightly across the gaming tables. Daily the ladies of pleasure drove up and down the streets in Tombstone in vehicles as flashingly up to date as any in New York or Washington, while the outlaws gathered at the bars and laughingly, openly, plainly boasted of their illegal conquests. Common indeed was the news that a stage had been robbed, the guards killed and the bullion stolen.

Wagons, trains of wagons, continually rumbled into town, bringing the finest liquors the markets of the world could offer. Behind large plate-glass windows were displayed everything from Colt revolvers and team harness to the latest Parisian styles in dinner gowns. Nightly throngs gathered at the Bird Cage Theatre to be entertained by smiling, dancing waitresses and some of the most famous stage folk then playing on the American continent. Nothing was too gaudy, too extravagant, too gay—or too wild or too tough for Tombstone! *Picturesque and real*—that was Tombstone!

Then dawned the day when water seeped into the mines. As if by magic the hell-roaring Tombstone was no more. In no more time than was required for the news to spread and be confirmed the population was reduced to fewer than two thousand people. Stores, saloons, gambling houses and the haunts of pleasure were stripped of their furnishings and became but places where lived ghosts and the memories of ghosts.

The daring, the brave, the fair but lawless, ethical and generous gun-fighters and robbers, and those who had the courage to stand up and shoot it out with them, moved on. The girls from the red lights gaily went their way. The gamblers searched for new gold and silver fields. The saloon men went to places where people had money to spend.

Where Tombstone had roared loud and long through the night, Tombstone now slept the sleep of the dead. Tombstone *had been* a tough town! But—Tombstone *was still* a tough town!

LIKE slinking coyotes waiting for the *lobo* to leave his kill the most despisable of all the humans in the town remained along with many of the best. Lacking nerve, ambition and the desire to chance the unknown, these dregs preferred to stay and free their desires to steal and kill, desires they had suppressed in the presence of the strong that had now departed.

For the first time in the history of what had been the widest-open town in the West, people were being held up and robbed of trifling sums in the streets. Burglars were entering homes. Women were being insulted on the streets. Horses were being stolen from hitching racks and stores were robbed at night. A potential thug lurked in every shadow. Then the criminal elements became bolder and showed a disposition to organize. Petty thieves in town allied themselves with petty rustlers in the county. It appeared that Tombstone, and all Cochise county for that matter, was about to pass into the hands of these petty criminals.

But the hard-working people, the substantial and responsible citizens were bound to come into their own. They were building a future for themselves, for their children and for their children's children. They were establishing permanent homes, churches and schools. A group of the leading men held a secret meeting. They needed a sheriff, a man who could and would kill off those undesirables he could not drive off!

John Slaughter did not want the office. He had no taste for public life. He was very busy with his extensive cattle interests. The committee insisted—he weakened and accepted. John Slaughter, *and his pearl-handled gun,* became the sheriff of Cochise county.

John Slaughter stands out unique in the annals of law officers. A charming host, a

staunch friend, a companionable and loving father and husband; as an officer he was all officer, wholly heartless and utterly fearless. He no more hesitated to kill a known criminal than to arrest him, and apparently, frequently took the former course to rid his county of the character and the taxpayers of the expense of keeping and trying him. His method of dealing with known violators was to shoot first and then call upon them to surrender.

He was a well and neatly dressed man, an inveterate cigar smoker and a most agreeable friend. Not timid, he was yet ill at ease among strangers. He wore his gun continually, even in his home, and practiced drawing and firing it not less than twenty times a day. In his early Arizona days he had served the Army as a scout and interpreter, and this early training stood him in good stead in his days as an officer. The mesa and the desert, the valley and the rugged mountainside held no secret from his careful eyes when he was on a trail. He surrendered the office duties to a deputy and became the field man himself.

A friend once referred to him as "an officer of the law." Another friend laughed, "Officer *of* the law, did you say? Hell! John Slaughter *is* the law!"

And so he was, with little if any faith in judges, juries and lawyers as such. He regarded himself as smart enough to know right from wrong and to fit a punishment to a crime. The hour of arrest was, to him, the hour of trial. If the crime charged against the defendant was sufficiently grievous to merit that consideration in the mind of John Slaughter, then John Slaughter was willing to officiate as executioner as well. Sometimes he merely ordered a man to leave the country. Not one of these orders was ever disobeyed—that is, the man either departed and knew it or he just left and never knew it.

One morning the owner of a Tombstone livery stable discovered two fine horses had been stolen during the night. He rushed to the hotel where the sheriff was eating breakfast to report the loss.

"All right," Slaughter assured him, "I'll get your horses."

An hour later, after an investigation at the barn, the officer mounted and took the trail to the south. The day passed without news of the officer or the thieves. The next morning the sheriff jogged into town leading the stolen horses. At the stable he found the owner smiling.

"Thanks, Sheriff. Damn but I'm glad to git these hosses back. Did you get th' thieves?"

"No trouble at all," Slaughter answered. "Glad to do it for you." He walked away. Later that day the stableman saw him cleaning his pearl-handled gun. Of course, he might have just been shooting at jackrabbits!

"Hoss thieves come scarcer 'n' scarcer all th' time," an old-timer related and he knew Slaughter intimately during the latter's days as sheriff. "I never saw John fail to bring back a stole hoss, but damned if I can remember ever seein' him bring back a live hoss thief! That wasn't his way—he was a law sheriff, not a political sheriff. I wisht we had some like him now."

One old officer who knew Slaughter for more than thirty years once said:

"John Slaughter, if he thought a man ought to be killed, would kill him as quick as he'd break a whiskey bottle, and me, well, I never knowed of him killing a man who shouldn't have been killed."

IN time a group of Mexicans came into the country from Mexico and California. They gathered themselves into one of the most active bands that ever stole from the ranchers of Cochise county. Robberies became more frequent, more stock was stolen than ever before, and they were encouraged in their criminal activities by unscrupulous Americans who would buy from them the cattle they had stolen in Mexico while delivering stolen American cattle in that country. The willingness of these Mexican *banditos* to kill was never doubted, but up to a certain time they had not gone so far in their lawlessness.

Slaughter had been in office more than a year when two cattlemen down near the Border gave up their lives defending their herds from this outlaw band. Slaughter had well-founded suspicions as to the identity of the guilty parties. Accordingly he arrested the man he thought to be the killer and leader of the band.

A jury quickly acquitted him because of insufficient evidence. The rumor was

rampant that it was a case of jury intimidation and judicial bribery. Whatever else it was, it caused John Slaughter's estimate of judges and juries to go down many notches and his faith in six-shooters, *in his six-shooter,* to go up many notches. The more thought he gave the matter the more determined he became.

Three days later he met the freed man on the street in Tombstone.

"I'll give you just ten hours to get out of this country and to stay out," Slaughter said to him.

"You ain't got no right to do it," the man protested.

Slaughter's fingers touched the magic pearl while he said, "Very well, then. I'll show you a way out."

"Don't! For Heaven's sake, don't!" the man screamed, recoiling in fear.

"Then you'll go?" Slaughter questioned.

"Yes! Yes! Give me a chance and I'll go!"

In less than an hour he was gone.

This outlaw, however, showed less discretion than the others who had been exiled by the softly spoken orders of the black-bearded man with the pearl-handled gun. A year later he moved back into the county, settling in a hut a number of miles from Tombstone and near San Simon. After hearing he was back, Slaughter rode forth one morning. He was gone three days and when he returned to his office he was silent as to the cause of his absence.

Two months later an interested group gathered around a spring wagon on Tombstone's Tough Nut Street. Laid out in it was a skeleton that had been found by wandering cowboys near the spot where the outlaw had been last seen.

John Slaughter walked up and peeped into the wagon.

"I expect," he meditated aloud, "that *hombre* had a chance to go to another country instead of to hell."

He walked away.

That night in a saloon conversation in which Slaughter was engaged the subject was turned to the skeleton.

"I know who used to wear them bones," a friend remarked.

"Then you know damned well he was a fool to bring them back to Cochise," Slaughter answered with another of his smiles.

JOHN SLAUGHTER was a most remarkable man and officer. No other man of the law on the frontier received the respect he commanded from law-abiding and law-violating alike. On two or three occasions he drove some of the wealthiest men in his territory into exile. Carefully, patiently and shrewdly he would gather his evidence against them, and then suddenly and unexpectedly confront them with the facts *and his pearl-handled six-shooter.* Few of them ever undertook to dispute the point with him.

"I'll either run you out of the country or kill you," he would state simply but with conviction.

At one time, and alone, he stalked three train robbers into their camp and killed all three when they resisted. A fourth he trailed for four days to finally bring him to a powder-and-lead justice under the pines.

In the light of John Slaughter, many lawmen of his day and time—the Earps, Masterson, Hickok, Brown, Thompson and still others—were no better than the outlaws they killed, and not as good as many of the men who fell before their withering shotgun blasts. But there was only *one* John Slaughter. He stands at the top of the honor roll of frontier peace officers, a man who literally shot law and order into a lawless and salty community. A man who with well-directed violence brought peace and tranquillity to a land of theft and murder. In him there was justice—a justice above that of courts and juries and parole boards, but a justice none the less and terrible in its ruthlessness and certainty.

After four years he retired. There was no further need for his services. For almost half a century Cochise county has been as when he left office.

Again he busied himself with his cattle. His hundred-thousand-acre ranch required his time and talents. He had served his people well and he had done well by himself.

It was at his ranch. The San Bernardino in the beautiful valley of that name, that in 1922, at the fine old age of eighty years, he gave up the ghost and was gathered unto his fathers.

Arizona's Greatest!

Grasping Mary's arm Glenn half dragged, half carried her across the plain to the horses.

Death hubbed that wagon fort . . . A buckskin handful making their pitiful stand against the scalp-hungry Pawnee hordes. Winning—they lived but to fight again. Losing—it was massacre or torture-stake.

California Caravan

By TED FOX

SEETHING with rage Glenn Hardy raced his lathered mustang across the brown prairie. Every nerve and muscle in the young plainsman's six feet two of bone and sinew was taut as a bow-string. At his side rode Hank Williams, trapper from the Rocky Mountain territory.

"We're half-way," Glenn shouted to his hawk-nosed friend pounding along beside him, "and no sign of the wagon train yet. Reckon the Injuns got it?"

Williams shrugged his bony shoulders. He was grim-lipped, tense, and his black eyes were slitted as they peered out from under the brim of his slouch hat. Glenn cursed savagely under his breath. Only five days ago a small party of immigrants had left Fort Kearney on another leg of their long trek to California. Then like a thunderbolt word had come that the Indians between Kearney and Fort Laramie were rising.

Glenn's first fear had been for Mary Eaton, and her father who was leader of the train. Glenn had come to know this scholarly old man and his daughter the few days they'd laid over at the fort. Mary was a slender, sweet-faced girl of twenty. He'd grown to like her. That was why he'd hit the saddle at the first word of trouble.

Reining to a halt atop a low rise Glenn's gaze swept eagerly over the rolling surface of the prairie. A section of the Platte River lay glittering in the sunlight a mile or two to the south. Then suddenly he stood up straight in the stirrups, a flood of relief surging through him at sight of the line of canvass-topped wagons curving over a rise less than a thousand yards away.

But at the same instant Hank Williams gripped his arm and pointed to the north. Glenn followed the trapper's finger with his eye, stiffened suddenly when he saw the thin column of smoke rising into the air low down on the horizon.

"Injuns signaling," Hank growled. "Looks like we got here a bit too late."

Glenn's heart sank. "Maybe we can make a run for it," he said in a tight voice. But his words didn't sound convincing, not even to his own ears. "I shouldn't have let them start on alone. It's my fault if they all get killed."

Glenn shuddered at the thought of that. Then he was whirling off the rise and racing across the prairie with Hank pounding along at his side. They didn't say anything more. Each knew what those smoke-signals meant.

Shouting and firing their rifles into the air to attract attention Glenn and Hank raced toward the head of the train. There were a dozen or so wagons in the line. Riding in the lead were Mary and her father. Glenn dragged his pony to a halt beside them and cut off their surprised greetings with a wave of his hand. Quickly then he told the white-haired old leader what he knew and what he'd seen only a few minutes ago. The train had come to a stop and the settlers were leaping down from their wagons and running forward to stand in a curious circle about the two newcomers. They were a plain-faced lot for the most part, dressed in home-spun, great ox-like men and a few sun-bonnetted women, farmer-folk from the New England states. John Eaton was a little different from the others, Glenn knew. He'd been a school teacher back in Connecticut.

"Perhaps it isn't as serious as you think," he said when Glenn was finished. "The Indians we saw at Fort Kearney were very friendly toward us."

Glenn's fists clenched fiercely at his sides as a growl of approval ran through the crowd of men. It was crazier than hell—a sixty-year-old school teacher leading a party of farmers across three thousand miles of wilderness, disregardful of danger and innocently trusting to God and their own good will to get them through. Only a few carried rifles and Glenn doubted if half of them even knew how to shoot.

"You're right in the heart of the Pawnee country," Glenn said tensely. "To the north of us are the Sioux and the Omahas and the Otoes; to the west the Cheyennes and the Shoshones and the Black feet, and to the south the Osages and Kickapoos. It's a general uprising. Fort Kearney's nearer than Laramie. You'll have to turn around and make a run for it."

He was looking at Mary when he said that and he suddenly felt sick at heart. She seemed lovelier than ever as she sat her horse there beside him. She was dressed like a man in trousers and flannel shirt. She was bare-headed and her mass of dark brown curls came tumbling to her shoulders behind.

"It'll be dark in another couple of hours," she said doubtfully. "Can't we camp here and start back in the morning?"

"No. Every second counts. You don't realize the danger. I tell you it's—"

Glenn broke off sharply as a cold voice drawled at his back: "Don't let him frighten yuh, ma'm. He don't know nothin'. There ain't no Injuns within a hundred miles of here."

GLENN twisted slowly in the saddle, started suddenly at sight of the hulking, red-bearded giant lounging against the nearest wagon, rifle slung in the crook of his right arm. Beside him stood two brutal-faced men who were plainly not settlers.

"What are you doing here, Brandt?" Glenn snapped coldly.

Mary and her father looked surprised. "You two know each other?"

Glenn nodded shortly. "We've met before—several times. Red Brandt's a whiskey-trader, half-breed Crow Indian and a renegade. But what's he doing here with you folks?"

"He joined us yesterday," John Eaton replied. "The last three wagons belong to him. But I didn't know they carried whiskey. He offered to guide us to Fort Laramie and I accepted."

Glenn nodded grimly. "And he'd end up by selling you out to the first war-party that came along. There's a lot about this man you'd better—"

"Why, damn your stinkin'—"

With a snarl of fury the red-bearded giant flung his rifle to his shoulder. Lunging forward onto his horse's neck as the weapon exploded, Glenn heard the bullet scream by his head. Then his horse was bounding forward and all in the same split second Glenn was leaping from the saddle and hurling himself on Brandt who had dropped his heavy weapon and was whipping out a knife.

A rangy, buckskin-clad figure leaped past Glenn. It was Hank. The old trapper was whirling his rifle about his head, lunging at the two men with Brandt. Glenn had dropped his own rifle. He was going in with his bare hands. The settlers were scattering, falling back hastily as Brandt's knife gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight.

Glenn ducked as Brandt's knife-arm flashed down. The renegade giant was snarling with fury, mouthing foul curses. Recovering his balance he raised his arm for another blow.

But before he could strike Glenn's first looped up and crashed into his bearded mouth. There were a hundred and ninety pounds of bone and solid muscle behind the blow and the giant staggered back and went down, toppling to the ground and rolling through the grass.

He came to one knee, lunged to his feet, spitting blood. Glenn flung a glance over his shoulder. Mary and her father were looking on in horror. Mary was clutching her throat with one hand. Her eyes were wide with fear. Her gaze riveted on the two.

Fists driving like pistons Brandt hurled himself on Glenn. The renegade had lost his knife. But his fists were like hams and the power behind his blows was like a sledge-hammer. Glenn felt them pounding into his face and neck, fell back slowly, suddenly felt himself crashing to the ground. Out of the corner of his eyes he caught a fleeting glimpse of Hank struggling with the two men. Then nausea gagged in his throat.

Then a heavy weight crushed his chest. Desperately Glenn fought to throw it off. He was lying on his back on the prairie with Brandt straddling his body. For a full minute his muscles felt weak and powerless. Fingers clawed at his throat, and slowly began to throttle the wind from his lungs.

GLENN'S senses returned with a rush and with a heaving, twisting motion he flung Brandt to the ground and leaped to his feet. With a savage curse Brandt rose up beside him. But Glenn was all over the renegade then, driving a rain of blows to his face, closing one eye, flattening his nose. Brandt fought back stubbornly. But there was no stopping Glenn now. He was putting every ounce of power behind his blows. He pounded Brandt up against the body of the nearest wagon, hammered him mercilessly to his knees.

Then the renegade was down, hugging the ground and groaning feebly, a battered, beaten hulk. But Glenn wasn't finished yet. Whirling, he hurled himself on the nearest of the two men fighting Hank. A bone-crushing right dropped the man in his tracks. A look of fear flashed across the other's pock-marked face. He retreated

slowly before Hank's advance, suddenly turned and bolted.

The old trapper started in pursuit, stopped and stared after him with a scornful smile on his leathery face as the man slunk away down the line of wagons. Brandt was just groaning back to life. He sat up and rubbed his jaw gingerly.

"I don't want any more trouble out of you," Glenn told him coldly. "Next time we won't be so easy on you."

Brandt glared back sullenly and rose stiffly to his feet. Glenn turned to John Eaton.

"We better head back for Fort Laramie without any more delay," he said. "It's your only possible chance."

Mary rode her horse up to him and looked searchingly into his bruised face. "You're hurt," she cried. "You'd better let me put something on that cut lip."

Glenn smiled and taking off his coonskin cap, wiped the sweat from his brow. "It's nothing," he said, but he felt a savage thrill run through him at the anxious tone in her voice.

"I reckon we've delayed a little too long already," Hank Williams growled. "Look yonder, Glenn."

Glenn followed the old trapper's pointing finger to the south and his heart suddenly froze. Smoke signal! A long thin spiral of smoke streaming high into the air a few miles distant.

"Now look over there."

Glenn whirled and stared in the direction of Fort Kearney and the way they'd come. More smoke signals! Still more to the north! And the west! Half a dozen smoke spirals smudging the blue horizon in every direction.

"Surrounded!" Glenn bit out through clenched teeth. "They've cut us off and they're telling each other. Not a chance in a million of getting through now."

John Eaton's face went suddenly white. He was looking at Mary and Glenn knew what he was thinking. The same thing was running through his own head, only he knew more than Eaton did, knew that the Pawnees were among the fiercest of the plains Indians—and the cruelest.

"We'll have to make camp here whether we like it or not," Glenn said tensely. "All right, you men. Get back to your wagons and form circle. If you don't mind, Eaton, I'll take charge. We're gonna have to fight."

Mary and her father looked at each other. "You think we can't," Mary said sharply. "We may be ignorant and unused to the ways of your frontier, but at least we're not afraid."

Glenn felt a thrill of admiration run through him at her words. But there wasn't time for any more talk. Springing into his saddle Glenn rode down the line to Brandt's wagons. A quick glance under the canvas hoods and he saw they were loaded with liquor. A feeling of rage gripped him at the sight. It was men like this renegade and his companions who caused most of the trouble between the Indians and the whites. At best an Indian was a savage. Filled with liquor he was inhuman, worse than the cruelest beast.

WITH a chorus of shrill yells and crack of bull whips the line of wagons moved forward across the prairie. Under Hank's direction they formed circle. Then the teams were unhitched and tethered. Glenn went among the settlers, looking at their guns, posting guards, encouraging them as best he could. There were eighteen men in all, not counting the three renegades who watched the preparations in surly silence. There were four women besides Mary. But no children, thank God, was what Glenn thought with a feeling of relief.

Supper was cooked while there was still light, then the fires were put out as it grew dark and in the moonlight the small band of white men settled down to wait for the attack.

"You better get some sleep," Glenn told Mary as she crouched beside him, near one of the wagons. "There won't be anything happening until daybreak."

"And then?"

Glenn shrugged. No sense in frightening her unnecessarily, he thought. She'd find out soon enough what happened when a mere handful of whites were caught and surrounded by ten times their number of savages on the war-path. The night was peaceful enough with the stars shining brightly overhead and the long buffalo grass gleaming like silver in the moonlight. But Glenn could sense a vague uneasiness among the horses, a sure sign Indians were about. Then a coyote howled mourn-

fully off to the right. A second later the call was answered to the left, then behind them, then to the front and Glenn felt a cold shiver needling slowly up along his spine. The Indians were closing in. He was sure of it. A horse snorted. Others pawed the ground nervously with their forefeet.

An hour passed, then two, then three and the night gradually wore on and still nothing happened to mar its peaceful tranquility. Some in that little band crouching beside their wagons waiting for the shrill war cry of the Pawnee to ring out, slept fitfully, tired out from straining their eyes to pierce the blackness of the prairie roundabout. But Hank and Glenn kept a sharp lookout for the first sign of trouble. Then it came.

Not the Indians, but the dawn, stealing into the eastern sky with a faint tinge of light low down on the horizon. Glenn tensed and Hank rose on one knee, rifle clutched in both hands. Mary crouched between them. Her father lay nearby. Minutes passed, nothing happened. Objects began to be discernible as the light spread swiftly now across the heavens. Objects outside the circle of wagons; the strained, drawn faces of the waiting settler band and the shadowy shapes of the horses inside.

THEN abruptly all hell broke loose. First it was a single shrill yell, then a whole chorus of bloodcurdling cries. And at the same instant the prairie became alive with paint-daubed, feather-plumed savages. They came leaping and bounding toward the wagons through the long buffalo grass.

With a thunderous roar the settler guns barked an answer. Sheets of flame stabbed into the half-light. Smoke swirled through the air. Louder and louder as they came leaping closer, the savage cry of the Pawnee rang out and chilled the blood of the crouching settlers. The four women and Mary were desperately loading rifles for the men. Brandt and his companions were nowhere to be seen.

Then the savages were all around the wagons and leaping past them into the interior of the circle. As one man the settlers reared to their feet to meet the attack. Fierce hand to hand fights sprang up. Horses reared and broke their hobbles, plunged through the melee, neighing and shrilling in panic.

Glenn emptied his rifle into the charging horde, grasped it by the stock with both hands and swung it furiously about his head. A sound of crunching skulls and two of the savages crashed to the ground. But two more leaped forward. They were brandishing knives. A third came in from the side. He was wielding a tomahawk.

Glenn's gun lashed out and knocked the tomahawk from the savage's hand. The other two closed in. One reached clawing fingers for Mary. Hank's gun barrel clubbed him to the turf. Two more sprang forward. There was no end to them.

Glenn swung his rifle desperately. The odds were twenty to one, he thought bitterly. Half a dozen of the settlers were already sprawled out in the grass. A savage bent down, leaped up a second later waving a bleeding scalp over his head. A woman's scream was choked off and ended in a gurgling moan. More and more Indians poured into the circle. More of the settlers went down.

Whirling at a scream behind him Glenn saw Mary struggling with a naked hideously-painted devil who was dragging her away with both arms wrapped about her waist.

"Glenn! Glenn! Please, save me! Glenn!"

Sick with horror Glenn flung himself at the Pawnee, pounded him over the head with his rifle. Then a blinding light suddenly flashed before his eyes. He half-turned, saw a feathered chieftain and two warriors leaping at him with upraised tomahawks. Again one of those stone weapons crashed down on his skull. The three Pawnees were all over him then, crushing him to the ground with their combined weight.

Desperately Glenn fought to hurl them from him. But he was hopelessly outmatched. Again and again one of those axes crashed down on his skull. Stars pinwheeled crazily before his eyes. Nausea gagged in his throat. Then everything went black.

A LOUD roaring noise in his ears was the next thing Glenn knew, then voices, deep guttural voices, a few moans, then more voices, louder now as the roar-

ing sound gradually lessened. Glenn struggled to sit up, felt paralyzed. He opened his eyes.

With a rush as he glanced down and saw the rawhide ropes binding his arms and legs, the whole thing came back to him. He was lying on the open prairie. At his side were some other figures, trussed up like himself, Mary and her father, two settlers and one of the four women. Beyond them and twenty yards away he could see the wagons. From inside the circle came shouts and cries, and an occasional scream. But the sounds were growing less, dying out.

Glenn's gaze took in the scene with dull horror and despair. The fight was over. It had been a massacre. Six of them had escaped with their lives. No sign of Hank. He was dead then.

"Glenn!"

Glenn turned his head and found himself looking into Mary's pale, blood-streaked face. He glanced quickly away. He couldn't bear the look of terror in her eyes. Then abruptly he stiffened. Coming across the prairie toward them were a score or more of the savages, feathered chieftains mostly. But with them was a white man. And he was walking free. Red Brandt!

There was a gloating smile on the renegade's brutal face when he stopped and gazed down at Glenn in triumph.

"Better pray for help, Hardy. By the time these redskins get through with you and your friends you'll be needing it."

With a vicious jab the renegade drove his boot toe crashing into Glenn's ribs. Glenn clenched his teeth fiercely and made no sound. The Indians were staring at him fiercely, eyeing Mary and the settler woman. With a short laugh Brandt turned on his heel and strode away. Glenn saw him drive his three wagons out of the circle. Horses were led forward then and Glenn and the other prisoners were strapped on, lying face down across their animal's withers.

Ten minutes later the whole war-party, a hundred or more in number, were mounted and riding away toward the North. Glenn looked back, saw the wagons had been set on fire. The bodies of the settlers were left lying where they had fallen. Hank was among them. It didn't seem possible to Glenn that the old trapper was dead. Hank had raised him from a mere pup. It didn't matter much, though. He'd soon be dead himself. They'd all be dead. Even Mary and the settler woman.

Most of that trip on horseback across the prairie under a boiling hot sun was a haze to Glenn. He'd lost more blood than any ordinary man could spare. The split in his skull ached and throbbed with each jarring pound of his horse's hoofbeats.

Twice he lost consciousness, came to to find they were still traveling. They were making slow progress. The Indians didn't seem to be in any hurry and glancing back Glenn saw the answer. Red Brandt and his wagonfuls of whiskey were straggling along at the rear.

Then in the afternoon they came in sight of a large Indian encampment sprawled out on both sides of a small river flowing north and south perpendicularly to the Platte. As they entered the rows of deerskin tepees a mob of women and children rushed forward with sticks and stones and fell upon the prisoners. A rain of blows descended on Glenn's head and shoulders. Frantically he strove to break the thongs binding his feet and wrists. He wanted to help Mary. The sight of an old snag-toothed squaw beating her with a heavy club made him suddenly see red.

BUT he was helpless. The back of Mary's shirt was torn and he could see her white shoulder. Then it was pink, then red and he cursed and raved when he saw her go suddenly limp, but he couldn't break the thongs binding him across his horse like a sack of meal.

Stopping before a tepee larger than the rest and with a cleared space in front of it, the Indians dumped the prisoners to the ground and led the horses away. A wrinkled old chieftain came out of the tepee and looked them over, his savage face an expressionless mask. The Indian mob fell silent. Then abruptly the old man shouted something in Pawnee and instantly a shout of approval went up.

Glenn felt a slow dread stealing over him when six wooden stakes about ten feet long were brought into the clearing and driven into the ground in a row before the central tepee. A minute later the six prisoners were each tied to a stake. Mary

was on Glenn's left, her father to his right, beyond him the three settlers. John Eaton seemed stunned by what was happening. Mary was only half-conscious.

For an hour the squaws and children were left alone to badger their prisoners. Then the sun sank below the horizon's edge and darkness settled over the prairie like a great black cloud. Fires were kindled, torches lighted. A drum started pounding, throbbing through the night. Others joined it. Then some dancers, paint-daubed and naked except for loin cloths came out into the clearing. The village was gathering along the side-lines.

Glenn felt suddenly sick when he saw the knives in those dancers' hands. It wasn't to be burning at the stake, he realized. But by bit the savages would cut them to shreds. Death by slow torture. He glanced at Mary and shuddered.

More and more dancers leaped into the clearing, brandishing knives, slicing at the prisoners, but not touching them. That would come later—as the climax.

An hour, then two passed. Wilder and wilder grew the dancing. Louder and fiercer beat the drums. Glenn wrenched at his bound wrists. All he asked was a chance to die fighting. But those rawhide thongs binding him had been tied well. He couldn't break them. He couldn't even stretch them.

Then off to one side he saw a sight that filled him with blind fury. Red Brandt was selling liquor to the Indians. In the torchlight Glenn could see the renegade standing beside his wagons near the river bank, passing out jugs in exchange for furs. That accounted for the way some of the dancers were staggering.

Hour after hour wore endlessly on. This was all part of the torture. This was almost as hard to bear as the torture itself, Glenn thought, suddenly tensed as a knife-blade drew blood on his chest. A big savage, taller than the rest, was the one wielding the weapon. He was wearing leggins, was naked from the waist up. He was wilder with his knife than the others and his dancing drunker, Glenn thought angrily.

Again that knife-blade pricked Glenn's chest, then ever so faintly—

"Glenn!"

It was barely a whisper. Glenn stared hard at the savage, suddenly froze. There was something familiar about that sharp-nosed face, those bony shoulders. Hank Williams!

"I'll cut you free—the horses—run for it—"

Again that whisper. It didn't seem possible that it could come from this wildly-cavorting savage. But the next instant Glenn felt the knife slash at his bound wrists. He moved his arm. He was free. But he kept his hands behind his back in the same position.

Swiftly Hank passed down the line, freeing the other prisoners. Glenn held his breath. One slip and they'd be discovered. It was dark, though, and the savages weren't suspicious. Then the last one, the settler woman, was free.

WITH a shout Hank flung off his Indian headress and leaped for the edge of the clearing. It was the signal. Instantly Glenn and the rest whirled away from their stakes and raced past the central tepee and into the outer darkness. A stunned silence fell over the village. For a second the Pawnees could only stand and stare at their fleeing backs. Then a howl of rage went up and the chase was on.

Grasping Mary's arm Glenn half-dragged, half-carried her across the plain toward the horses. Hank was bounding on ahead, slashing at hobbles with his knife. Horses shrilled and nickered. Glenn flung Mary onto the nearest one's back, helped the settler woman on another. A gun roared behind them. Then a whole fusillade. Bullets screamed by overhead.

Leaping astride a plunging mustang Glenn wrenched him around by the mane. They had no saddles, no bridles. But the horses were filled with terror. They needed no guiding. At a mad tearing run they wheeled and raced away into the darkness. Glenn made out Mary pounding along at his side. Hank and her father were ahead, the settlers behind.

Then abruptly Glenn saw a great shadowy shape come plunging out of the blackness to cut them off. It was a horseman. A rifle blazed almost in Glenn's face. A bullet grazed his neck. But in the momentary flash he made out who it was. Red Brandt!

With a low curse Glenn wrenched his horse off to the right to meet the red-

bearded renegade. Brandt must have hit the saddle at the first cry of alarm. Glenn saw him throw down his rifle now, whip a knife. Then with a crash the two ponies collided. Glenn's horse went down, plunging to its knees. Glenn leaped clear. Brandt was fighting his rearing animal.

Reaching up, Glenn seized the renegade by the leg, dragged him bodily from the saddle. Brandt was snarling like some wild beast. He was half-drunk himself. His foul breath made Glen choke and gasp. But he was powerful. His knife-arm flashed down.

With a desperate grab Glenn caught the big man's wrist, stopped that descending blow. His fist whipped into the renegade's face. Brandt grunted and staggered back. Once again Glenn's fist lashed out. This time the renegade went down, sprawling to the ground on his back. The long-bladed knife flew from his hands and fell into the grass a dozen yards away.

But then Brandt was leaping to his feet and this time he was clutching a pistol. Glenn ducked and closed in, seizing the gun by the barrel and twisting the muzzle into Brandt's chest. With a roar the weapon exploded.

Glenn sprang back as the renegade giant flung up his arms and plunged to the ground. Out of the corners of his eyes Glenn saw the Indians, a hundred screaming demons, not a dozen yards away. They were mounted, sweeping across the prairie, shooting their guns, shrieking and yelling.

Scooping up the fallen rifle Glenn ran toward Brandt's horse. Clawing into the saddle he raced off in pursuit of his companions. Hank had fallen back. He was using a rawhide hackamore for reins.

"We'll have to stop them Injuns," he shouted above the pounding hoofbeats.

"There *is* no way of stoppin' them," Glenn shouted back. "Just keep going. Something may—"

Glenn broke off sharply as his eyes fell on the powder-horn and bullet-pouch slung to the saddle in front of him. A feeling of hope stabbed through him. Taking the powder-horn he pulled the stopper with his teeth, poured some of the black grains into the pan of Brandt's rifle. Then he was dragging his startled animal to a halt and leaping to the ground.

Dropping to his knees Glenn dumped the contents of the powder-horn into the grass, held the rifle to it, pulled the trigger. A sparkle of flint, a red flash as the powder caught, and the prairie was afire. It was a small patch of flame at first. But a strong wind was blowing toward the Indians and it picked it up and whipped it suddenly into a fury.

WITH a roar a sheet of flame leaped up and spread across the prairie. Instantly the savages were blotted from sight. But Glenn could hear their sudden howls of anger and dismay as they were cut off.

Springing into the saddle again Glenn rode after his friends. They had stopped to wait for him. Mary looked drawn and haggard but she was smiling when he slid to a stop beside her. Glancing back he saw a wall of flame leaping high into the air and spreading out fanways with the speed of the wind.

"We'll have to keep ahead of the fire," Glenn shouted above the roar and crackle of the flames. "It won't move fast against the wind, though. We're safe."

Glenn suddenly felt tired. It had been a nerve-wracking twenty-four hours.

"How'd you get away?" he asked, turning on Hank Williams.

The old trapper grinned. "Got knocked out and somehow they missed takin' my scalp. Came to and followed. Joinin' that dancing party was the only way I could figure to help. A little mud from the river did the trick. Hope I didn't stick any of you too hard."

Glenn squeezed the old trapper's arm. Then reaching down he swept Mary from her horse and held her gently in his arms. She didn't seem to mind. She closed her eyes and laid her head on his chest. A savage thrill ran through Glenn when he felt her arms go up around his neck.

With a crackle and roar the flames swept nearer. The fire had spread across a mile of prairie with the speed of lightning. The shadows of night had been hurled back and Glenn could look down into Mary's upturned face and see the lines of terror slowly disappearing. He swore that never again would he let her out of his sight. But then California was a place he and Hank had always wanted to see.

The Short-Gun Crusader

By WILLIAM CORCORAN

Texan! A fighting word along that Montana strip. But trail-weary Tom Emory wasn't eating dust for any Montana maverick. Border-born, he figgered only one argument ever moved a trail herd—smoking sixes!

TO an eye trained from boyhood to recognize trouble on sight, there was sign of it aplenty in Trail City. Tom Emory, arrogantly at ease in chaps and spurs and Stetson hat, walked his horse down Main Street, and his cool. opaque gaze missed nothing. The town was quiet, for one thing; far too quiet for a Montana cowtown crowded with men in the early fall season. The bristling array of carbine stocks sprouting from saddle boots along the hitch rails made plain to the tall Texan the sinister presence of war in Denman County.

Tom Emory hummed an idle tune as he slid from the saddle in front of the Longhorn saloon. He'd better find out about this pronto. One way to satisfy curiosity was to go to headquarters, and this looked like it, a broad, false-fronted frame building with a crowded hitch rail. In Montana when the battle flags were flying a Texas man walked softly and looked to his powder that it was dry. In this very country one gallant Texan Tom had known since boyhood had died abruptly but a year before.

The bar in the Longhorn was lined with men, sober of face and terse of speech. Tom classified them: local cattlemen and their outfits, freelance buffalo hunters, tough and resourceful, and a scattering of professional gunfighters. There were no revelers.

A silence fell as Tom entered.

Tom Emory found a place at the near end of the bar.

"A whiskey neat, suh, and the best the

house affords. And I'll take it kindly if you'll join me."

The barkeep grunted and looked at him coolly, enigmatically. He whisked two glasses and a bottle to the bar. In his turn he poured a small drink which disappeared with a curt, "Drink hearty." And abruptly he was gone.

Tom Emory needed no more than that. The bartender had conveyed to him plainly enough that his presence here was tolerated, but little more; that it would be discreet to drift.

Tom, fresh from a two days' journey down over the empty tablelands to the north, was troubled. He had worked all season on a remote horse ranch where no news of war had traveled. Now, neither curiosity nor a craving for company ever justified a man butting into other folks' feuds. Yet Tom had a rendezvous; he was to meet an old partner here some time within the week. He frowned as he thought of it. Ordinarily, now, it would take plenty trouble; more than was packed in a keg of giant powder, to keep him from being on hand to meet Don Stuart when Tom's old bunkie landed in Trail City.

A HAND touched Tom's elbow with firm pressure. Tom turned quickly. Facing him in somber challenge stood a big man, handsome in a brutal fashion, faintly elegant in his dark riding clothes and white linen.

"Texas, I reckon?"

"Correct," admitted Tom. "Likewise Colorado, the Dakotas, Nebraska and most any place you might mention."

"How long Montana cowboy?"

Tom delayed his reply. It was very recently Montana, in all truth. But why, now, should he give this fellow any information?

"It's just possible suh," he told the big man with velvet courtesy, "that this is all in the way of being your business. But I reckon I can't see it that way yet. Suppose you kindly explain."

They were silent all about him, watching with glints of dour suspicion in their hard eyes. He was aware of that concentrated gaze. The cold hostility of it touched him like ice. It baffled him even as it chilled him.

"You sneakin' spy," the big man said slowly. His hard white teeth bared in a cruel leer. "You mesquite country gunmen don't need explanations. What you need most is a short rope and a cottonwood limb." He paused. "What's your outfit?" he snapped.

Tom shrugged and reached for the makings.

"No outfit at present," he said. "I quit on the Little Beaver and rode this way for a job." He shook tobacco into a curled paper.

"Don't lie, you coyote. Everything on you shouts Texas to me. Whose herd did you come up the trail with?"

"Well," said Tom, drawling and deliberate, "I come up three years ago the last time. As for the outfit . . ." His hand held out the tobacco sack and executed a quick movement which snapped the strings tightly closed over the mouth. With stunning abruptness it did more—it completed a second deft pass which lifted Tom's ready gun from its holster and thrust the muzzle jarringly into the big man's stomach.

"I reckon you never been to Texas, mister," he said curtly. "If so, they'd have taught you better manners. Back up. Move! I don't figure to be cross-whipped by anybody in this war party."

THE man's face was red with choked and furious chagrin but he backed. He had been thoroughly and expertly taken in, and he was too good a judge of gunplay to resist. There were a few fitful starts among his companions, but the thumb holding back the hammer of Tom Emory's gun looked all too ready to release it. Tom flipped his captive's gun from its holster and tossed it into an empty corner of the room. Then he faced his man about so that he formed a partial shield.

"When in Rome, out-do the Romans," he said grimly, addressing the room at large. "So my daddy told me a long time ago. Now I'll ask a few questions. What's brewing in this town? Since I'm dragged into it I aim to get the details."

No one answered. They stared at him with tense, silent hatred. Any one of them, Tom Emory was quite coldly aware, would have drawn and dropped him on the spot if he dared; the point being that just at that moment not one of them dared.

A man strolled from one end of the bar toward the center of the floor. He was a portly red-cheeked man with graying hair, shrewd eyes, and a placating air. He was a prosperous city man by his appearance, in dark clothes and white stock tie. He bore no visible weapon.

"Now, now, gentlemen," he protested with unction. "This will never do. We have too much ahead of us. If this man is from the herds let him ride back with a story of what he saw. If he's not, we're wasting time. Donner, let's have no more hostilities." To Tom he said politely, "If you'll have a drink with me, sir, I'll guarantee your safe departure from town, should you choose to leave."

Tom looked at the man sharply. He seemed to be the big sugar in this crowd, and there was authority in his request to the captive, Donner, that hostilities cease.

"Suits me," Tom agreed. "I'm not hunting hostilities with any man. I was cornered and looking for the way out." He put away the gun. "Maybe you'll explain to me suh, how-come I'm a spy and a mesquite badman all so sudden." He smiled grimly.

"I can," replied the portly man. "We'll walk down to the hotel where we can drink quietly. I want to talk to you." And with a significant look of admonition toward Donner and the silent crowd, the man led the way from the Longhorn Saloon.

TOM EMORY required little detail to understand the story when his new friend, Alvin B. Shipman by name, explained the situation. At the bar of the hotel, a building with two stories, its porch and upper veranda overlooking the dusty roadway and plank sidewalks of Main Street, the two men talked alone. The beef herds for the southern ranges, on the trail these weeks and months, were arriving at their northern destinations, as they had done in this season for many years. Denman County was no longer virgin range, however. It now supported its own breeding herds and, desiring to protect them, withheld the cordial hospitality of other seasons toward Texas cattle.

There was a very important reason behind this change of face. It was fever—Texas fever which ravaged northern herd so mysteriously whenever native cattle came in contact with the newcomers from the South. Frost killed the fever, but until first frost arrived the native stock did not dare even graze land where Texas stock had passed.

"And so Denman County, which happens to be in the path of several herds of Texas cattle bound farther north," Shipman explained suavely, "has organized armed resistance. It's all quite legal. There is a quarantine line being established just above Salt Creek and the men here in town are going to ride out to hold that line. You said you were looking for a job, and I saw plainly how you can handle a gun. We need men and will pay ten dollars a day for your loyal service on the line. How does that strike you?"

Tom Emory was a little astonished. He had seen quarantine established in other days when he rode with the trail herds, had witnessed light skirmishes when they were defied, but never had he seen resistance carried to its present extreme.

"But I thought the county always set aside a trail strip for through cattle," Tom said. "The county ranchers kept their stuff from ranging on the strip and escaped the fever. They charged the herds watering fees and made money on the deal. What happened to the strip?"

"These herders are outlaws," Shipman explained grimly. "They have announced their intention of ignoring the strip and trailing straight across the native ranges. They have hired gunmen and propose to set aside the constituted authority of this county. They've asked for trouble—and by heaven, they're going to get it!"

Tom was troubled. He looked moodily into his glass.

"No, I reckon I'll fight shy of this trouble, suh," he said finally. "I see the point clear enough, but I know those Texas boys and what they no doubt faced all the way up the trail this season. Drought and stampede and extortion and quarantines every other day. It's their fight and they're welcome to it, but don't ask me to ride out and draw a gun again' my own kind."

"But that's the point," Shipman exclaimed. "They are not Texas herds with Texas cowmen. These outfits of gunmen are from Kansas and Nebraska. The herds have passed through several hands

and are the property of reckless speculators with no interest in the business aside from the crooked dollar to be made. The natives you saw in the Longhorn are naturally resentful of Texans. It's purely a confusion of ideas. I trusted you to see it clearly. It's time for real cattlemen to stick together in self-defense."

Tom Emory looked at Shipman. If this was true, it was a horse of a different complexion. Shipman talked like a candidate at a political rally, but he was convincing. Tom knew cattle speculators and despised them. Crooks, sharpers and harpies. They fleeced a cowboy after months of labor and privation if they got the chance. They drove their herds ruthlessly, cruelly, aiming at nothing but a quick turnover and a long profit on flesh and blood.

"Now you're talking a little closer to home, Mister Shipman," Tom said softly. "I could use a job, I reckon. And I ain't shy about using a gun where a gun is prescribed by the doctors. If there's one thing on earth I hate worse than any other, it's a thieving, crooked cattle speculator."

"Then you'll ride with us?"

"Things being as you say, I reckon you couldn't keep me away."

"That's what I like to hear." Shipman beamed. There was a gleam of satisfaction in his eye. "I can always tell a man when I see one. Don't worry about the natives." He drew forth an ample purse and extracted from it a ten-dollar gold piece which he tendered in earnest payment. The bargain was sealed.

II

TOM EMORY, when left alone by the pompous Shipman with full orders for the day, reflected on this strange turn of events. He could understand the town's hostility now. He pictured the herds on the trail; great sprawling masses of cattle a mile or more in length, guarded by escorts of hard, reckless fighting men, dust clouds rising behind them to towering heights, visible for miles. They were fluid reservoirs of brute strength with terrible potentialities for death and disaster.

These men of Denman County were determined, but they were also arrogant, too sure of themselves. Tomorrow, perhaps this very day, the goriest page on Montana's frontier history might be written in letters of blood.

Well, Tom Emory was grimly willing. As a Texan defending his cattle he had fought those renegades before, the wolves of Abilene and Ellsworth and Dodge, and as a Texan he could face them again without flinching. He wished that Don Stuart were here to ride with him tomorrow. Once there had been three of them who rode everywhere together, Tom and Don and Paul Blaine, the Smilin' Kid. The Kid had fallen before a renegade gun just one year ago, and now there were only two. It would be but ironic justice if those two were to exact together a measure of vengeance on the same foreign soil where their comrade had died.

Tom, following his instructions, returned to the Longhorn Saloon hitch-rail and got his horse. Mounting, he rode along the street toward the corral at the edge of town. On either side ranged the usual cowtown business structures; bare and sunbleached one-story buildings with small windows crowded with merchandise calculated to catch a cowboy's eye.

At the corral the main body of the quarantine force was gradually concentrating its animals. Feed was provided here for them. A number of men were busy with their mounts as Tom unsaddled and inspected his black gelding, an intelligent and loyal companion through many long months of rambling, well deserving the hallowed name of "Traveler."

A voice nearby caught Tom's attention, and he paused beside the horse to listen. It was a sarcastic and very audible voice that invited listening.

"Yes, I understand we're entertaining a very special guest from down yonder among us today," the voice drawled. "A specially poisonous specimen of a coyote, too, which is expected to be way up front when the lead starts flying. The old man hired him with a true understanding of the breed. We all thought first he was a plain spy, but it seems he ain't—he's a fancy, double-crossing reptile you could trust to shoot down his own brother for a dollar."

TOM EMORY slowly turned sideways. Apparently, then, Shipman had not placated all the natives. Tom's gaze met

and held the cold, brittle regard of a stocky, unpleasant-looking rider who leaned against the corral bars a short distance off. The man's jaw was slightly forward in challenge; his shoulders sloped loosely and his thumbs were hooked in his gun belt. His intention obviously was to provoke something. In the silence that followed, his companions decided that he had succeeded; they quietly removed themselves from his immediate vicinity, and, ostensibly busy, watched warily.

Tom patted Traveler reassuringly, roughly, and left him. He walked with unhurried gait toward the man.

"You were just saying things about somebody, stranger," said Tom as he halted before the man, feet apart, hands on hips. "Might I inquire about one fact you mentioned—just exactly what you meant about that matter of shooting his brother?"

"You know dang' well what I mean, Texas."

"Then you were referring to me?"

"I was."

'And you were likewise referring to the outfits on the trail? Which I reckon you mean are Texan?"

"You're danged right I meant it. Straight up the Chisholm Trail from Los Lobos."

"From *where?*" Tom Emory shot out the question. The man laughed a soft, unpleasant laugh.

"Kind of surprised, eh, Texas? Or maybe a little upset? I called the turn on you the minute I saw you, cowboy. I remember your face from the time I seen you with a Los Lobos outfit in Dodge three years back. You're a yellow, sneaking spy. The old man was a fool for thinking he could use you, and I'm going to see he learns it."

Tom Emory took a long, slow breath. It was an expression of grim relief, as at a narrow escape.

"So Alvin Shipman reckoned to use me, eh, Montana?" he drawled. "He did pull the wool over my eyes in right pretty style. It's likely I'd join in your scrap before I learned the truth. And then if I didn't like it, a bullet from my own side could settle *that*. And you'd have at least one killing you could charge again' the Los Lobos outfits."

He paused, and his voice became chill. "If it matters, I may as well state I'm resigning from this outfit. And I might add I ain't a spy, and had no aim to join what ain't my fight. And finally and in conclusion, Montana, I'll throw in my personal opinion that I don't like the way you talk nor look nor act in company, and that in general I class you as two or three cuts lower than a skunk."

It was a formidable speech, no matter when or where delivered. Tom Emory's lips were a thin line on his set face when he finished. The native rider came erect during its delivery, and two red spots showed through the tan on his cheeks. His nostrils quivered slightly. He remained still, his eyes glittering.

Tom Emory snorted suddenly, softly, in contempt. He swung aside, looked at the man a moment further, and then strode on long, stiff legs for his horse.

TOM had not reached Traveler's side when, touched off by some unnameable instinct, he whirled in his tracks as though spun by a powerful spring. The same movement brought up his gun and turned loose the swift, thunderous death in its chambers. The man by the corral poles had gone for his gun a fractional second before Tom.

The first two shots sounded together. The next sounded alone, and the fourth. And the stocky man was suddenly clinging to the bare poles, while Tom Emory, erect and electric with cold fury, was threatening the man's comrades with the two remaining shots in his smoking gun.

"Move, one of you Piutes, and you get the same," he snarled.

They did not move. Their awed glances went from Tom to the sagging, gruesome figure clinging like a limp rag to the corral poles. They watched it with morbid fascination while it lost its grip, dropped to earth, and sprawled flat in the dust, dead even before it was still, with a small, precise hole drilled straight through its beating heart.

"You all witnessed a justifiable killing," snapped Tom. "You'll take care of that carcass. And you'll tell your sheriff exactly what you saw. That clear?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Then one of them found voice.

"Good here, Texas. This wasn't *my* play."

"It better not be," Tom said grimly.

The group walked gingerly to the dead man. Tom slid home his gun after swiftly replacing the exploded shells, and next threw his saddle on Traveler. A jerk, and the cinch was tight. He was in the saddle when several men came running into the yard. They looked at him and ran on toward the body.

Tom Emory rode out of the yard through the street gate without interference, erect in the saddle, his right hand free, his eyes frosty, clearly aware of his dangerous standing in Trail City. He could remain now by no right or privilege of his own, but only by the might that existed so awesomely in that smoothly holstered gun. They had seen him use it twice; they knew what to expect.

TOM went first to the Longhorn Saloon. He did not hitch Traveler, but left him anchored, rangewise, to trailing reins. Through the doors he strode and into the wide room. A dozen men still lingered here.

"Where's Shipman?" Tom demanded stormily.

"Ain't been here the last hour," the bartender made haste to reply.

"Where'll I find him?"

'Can't tell, Texas. He's all over town. Or maybe gone to the quarantine line."

Tom reflected a moment, eying these men. There had come a subtle alteration in their air, as though they had been admonished about the new recruit. No friendliness was in evidence, rather a subdued hostility. Had not one of them suddenly recognized him for an old Los Lobos hand, they would have left him alone and in a tragic trap. These men had, of course, not yet learned the details of what happened in the corral.

Tom abruptly left the saloon. He led Traveler along the street. There was a stir of activity about the corral gate, and he kept an eye on it. He went to the hotel and made inquiry inside after Shipman. The taciturn proprietor denied acquaintance with his whereabouts.

In the street again, Tom was somewhat at a loss. He saw a man walk quickly out of the corral and head down the street toward him. The man suddenly recognized him, for he raised a hand in a peremptory hail. Tom waited.

The stranger was a middle aged man, long limbed, black mustached, and dour. In his open vest Tom perceived a five-pointed star.

"I'm Sheriff Maddox," the man announced, stopping before Tom. He was in a truculent mood. "Am I correctly informed about that killing up the street?"

"I reckon you are," said Tom, "if you been informed that I shot that fellow after he drew on me with my back turned."

"Exactly. It's clear enough self-defense and I ain't interested in an arrest. But I aim to keep the peace, and one way of doing it is to see you get out of town. I can't control all these gun-toters and I don't aim to try."

"I'll go when I'm ready, Sheriff," Tom told him evenly. "And that ain't just yet. I got a little detail to attend to."

"For instance?"

"I aim to see that maverick Shipman and make him eat the ten dollar piece he gave me."

"I'm telling you to ride, Texas," the officer repeated. "I ain't going to arrest you—but by Judas, there's other means."

"For instance?"

"Well, for one, I ain't going to arrest the man that shoots you."

Tom Emory laughed unpleasantly.

"Tell me who it's likely to be and I'll go look him up to save time, Sheriff."

"All right, I'll tell you. It's most likely to be Howard Donner, the man you stuck a gun into once today. If you know who he is, you're welcome to look him up. It'll save me a heap of trouble." The sheriff spat viciously and copiously through a crack in the plank sidewalk. "You got one hour to make up your mind. I look to see you gone by that time." And walking around Tom, Sheriff Maddox strode on his way to the carpenter shop to order a pine coffin for the recently deceased.

"HOLD on, Sheriff," Tom suddenly called after him. He followed to where the officer stood waiting. "Who is this Alvin B. Shipman that's running this show?"

"Cattleman," snapped Maddox. "Big investor."

"Native to the county?" Tom questioned.

"No."

"Where does he range?"

"Don't range. He's a capitalist, a dealer."

"I see," said Tom softly, his gaze narrowing. "That's all I wanted to know."

It was sufficient. Shipman was a speculator, and Tom knew there was more to this situation than appeared on the surface. No motives of altruism would ever induce a man of his stamp to organize and finance resistance to cattle deliveries. It was to his benefit, logically, to keep the trail open. Some way, somehow, this was a double-cross.

Those Los Lobos herds were from Tom's home country, and old loyalties burned anew within him. He had remained north, possessed of a wanderlust, the last time he rode up the trail, and he had seen none of the old outfit these three years. Word had come to him through a strange drover passing by the Little Beaver country of Don Stuart's summons. The drover had no other news. He simply delivered the welcome message that Don would be in Trail City during this present week, and for Tom to join him. It was the sort of friendly, old-fashioned summons coming casually over the range which caused a man to drop everything without question, and respond.

If those herds below actually were Los Lobos cattle, then Don Stuart surely rode with them. This had not been Tom Emory's fight when he first entered Trail City, but now the matter was an open question, calling for investigation. The first step, since it was the handiest, was to hunt up that pirate Shipman and get whatever was possible out of him.

Tom Emory roved the town during the next half hour, but, to his increasing exasperation, without result. He sought to make himself inconspicuous, but that effort was also quite without result. He was a marked man in the town, with a deadline before him, and the eyes of the town followed him silently wherever he went. The town's own citizens, the peaceable merchants and plyers of the town's small industries, avoided him and awaited the issue behind closed doors.

Tom Emory entertained no illusions about that deadline. A grim kind of stubbornness kept him to his purpose in spite of it. Baffled and coldly wrathful, he held Traveler ever close at hand and avoided the Main Street. He finally went to the hotel, leaving his mount in the rear, and stared up the street from the hotel window. The sidewalks were almost empty of life; the quiet in Trail City had intensified.

Presently a man came down Main Street, a tough and genial oldtimer who walked with a heavy cane to favor a leg that limped. Tom watched him, sizing him up instinctively. Town man, but had been a cattleman once. That leg probably had retired him. Shrewd old longhorn with a sense of humor. Up to something, Tom surmised, and doubted not that it was something of bearing on himself.

THE old fellow entered the hotel, nodded to the proprietor behind the desk, and strolled over to the window where Tom was standing watchfully. He began to roll a cigaret while giving Tom his frank appraisal. Tom waited for him to speak.

"Name's Glover," the oldtimer finally announced with laconic affability. "Mayor of this town. Naturally interested in civic peace and progress and such-like. Been hearing about you."

"Don't doubt it," said Tom. "I been getting more than my share of attention."

"Such things happen. Acts of the Almighty and freaks of nature are in the same class." Glover lighted the cigaret and continued in a reminiscent tone, "I mind the time I was in Tulosa, Texas, when I got a lot more than my due share of attention. That was in the days when Pat Carmody, the crack gambler, and City Marshal Dan Spade ordered things around in Tulosa and were running neck and neck in their score of killings. I was down buying a herd of two-year-olds to trail up North. Got in a little trouble. Difference of opinion about too many black aces in a poker deck with Pat Carmody. Probably been a double funeral if we scrapped, but we didn't. He ordered me to get out of town before night. Which meant I'd be dropped sudden from a dark alley or the like if I didn't go."

The mayor paused, and there was a reflective light in his eye. Tom Emory waited. He knew no answer was expected.

Here was an oldtimer he could understand.

"I didn't leave Tulosa fast enough, I reckon," said Glover, "so Marshal Dan Spade came looking me up and ordered me to get out, too. I figure he was jealous of Carmody and feared he was due to cut another notch in his gun. Anyway, I said I'd think about it. I packed my gear and left my horse behind a shanty at the edge of town, and a little later I went and looked up both Carmody and Spade. Saw them separately. I told Pat Carmody I didn't reckon I'd leave because Marshal Spade advised me to pay no attention to Carmody's order and promised to look out for me. After that I told Dan Spade the same thing, only reversing the situation. I made an awful liar out of myself, telling each of them how the other had brazenly defied him.

"Then I went and forked my horse and rode quietly out of town and camped that night on the prairie. I had a good sleep and rode back into town early and went about my business without further trouble. Them two gunfighters had met in front of the railroad station about eight o'clock the night before and shot each other full of holes on sight."

Tom Emory grinned slowly. Glover looked at him with a twinkle in his shrewd old eye.

"Which all goes to prove, son, that a man in a strange country is better off to let the natives kill themselves in their own peculiar way without either help or interference. It's a habit that pays."

And with a genial salute the old cattleman turned and strolled out of the hotel and walked back along the sidewalk the way he had come.

Tom watched him go and continued to stare after him for a moment. There was something about the old fellow that commanded respect and admiration. His story was doubtless true; if not, it was a shrewd invention. Tom grinned again and shook his head, and lighting a last cigaret, headed through the side door of the hotel back to the yard where Traveler was tethered.

III

FIVE minutes later, after circling through back alleys, Tom Emory was out of Trail City, and Traveler was swinging into his long-legged, tireless stride to southward, where, at Salt Creek, the tides of Texas cattle were about to break on an inhospitable shore.

In the dense darkness of that evening, Tom Emory rode slowly over the grassy bottoms of a vast valley toward the flickering beacon of a camp-fire. The fire had been in view since he had crossed the ridge directly north. He could not make out the herd which doubtless was spread out somewhere in the vicinity, already bedded down and quiet, but there was little question that this was the first of the Texas outfits. From a rise on the prairie, Tom had picked out in the late afternoon sun a red dust haze miles off which marked the passage of cattle on the march.

A voice out of the night brought Tom to a halt. He was suddenly conscious of the warm aroma of cattle, and his eyes picked out the dim figure of a rider barring his path. The man had thrown him a low-pitched, penetrating challenge.

"Who's there?"

"Friend," Tom responded instantly. "This a Los Lobos herd?"

"Maybe. Who are you?"

The other came close, but Tom could recognize neither the features nor the voice.

"Tom Emory," he explained quietly. "Is Don Stuart with you-all this year?"

"Stranger, this is no time or place for questions," the puncher said grimly. "I can see pretty plain, and I got my gun covering you. Keep going slow-like toward that fire and we'll talk things over there."

"No objections here, boy. That's just where I aim to light."

They rode forward and into the circle of firelight and were received, on recognition, with wild delight. The outfit, most of whom Tom knew well, was laboring under a strain which made his arrival from the North with news doubly welcome. They were sprawled about the fire, about to turn in for the night; but Don Stuart—who, Tom was pleased and impressed to learn, had been promoted to trail foreman—put the idea instantly aside.

"Hondo," he ordered Tom's escort, "take care of that horse. Cook, rustle some grub. The rest of you blanket rasslers, move way out on the prairie if you hone to sleep. This-here outfit is about to hold a jubilee."

Don Stuart was a straight and tall young rider whose eyes were hard and blue and crystal clear. Six years with the Los Lobos trail herds and a natural talent for handling cattle had gained him his reward. He was a young man, shrewd and quick both of wit and temper, commanding a compact detachment of other young men whose adaptability to environment and occupation was exceeded nowhere in the world.

TOM EMORY narrated the events of the day in Trail City, and described all that he had observed. They all listened with somber attention, finding in his account a grim endorsement of their fears. Next, Tom required earnestly of Stuart an explanation of the mystifying situation wherein a cattle dealer was seeking to close the channels of his own business. Somehow, it didn't ring true.

"He ain't wrecking *his* business," Stuart corrected. "But he's the kind of coyote would wreck another's to smash. That quarantine is his own doing. Old Judge Pickering's Los Lobos herds have been the cream of the beef crop for years. We all know why—because he picks his own cattle, hires on his own hands year after year, and fusses over the brutes, man and beast, every minute till the season ends. There's two more herds behind me now. Not a cull nor a cripple in the whole ten thousand head, and the best outfits and remudas ever crossed the Nation."

"Where you-all making delivery?" Tom asked thoughtfully.

"On the Sweetwater. There's a rich cattle company stocking up wholesale on a new range. Judge Pickering got the contract—with a fooler hidden in it. He's got to make delivery by noon five days from now or the paper's worthless and the company can buy in the open market. Nobody in his right mind would compete with a Los Lobos herd ordinarily. But this Alvin Shipman fellow is competing—and outpointing us at the start."

"How come that? It still fails to tally."

"He picked up three herds in Kansas and Nebraska," Stuart explained, and his voice was crisp with cold anger. "They can't stack up to our cattle, but they're cheap. The market dropped in midsummer and gave him the chance. He can undersell us on the delivery range if we invalidate the contract by being late. And the beef company people, bankers and fool investors, will snap up the chance. Shipman has one herd already there. It actually went through Denman County only last week before he began agitating for the quarantine and spending money wholesale to line up the ranchers."

"How will he get his other two herds through then?" Tom demanded.

"There's the trick, Tom. Those two herds are driving through the badlands, driving like the devil was riding their tails. It's a forced dry march that no honest cattleman would ever take while he had any other way out. They're circling north while we're bottled up in Denman County. Mister Alvin Shipman will sell his gaunted, crippled stuff for a fortune and be gone before we even get there."

"And the Judge, what with one thing and another," Tom Emory said soberly, "will be stuck with ten thousand unsold beeves three months from home, thereby losing that identical fortune."

He reflected a moment staring into the embers. The others waited for him to complete some thought implied by his manner of speaking.

Suddenly he said, "Look here, Don Stuart. All you Texas lobos. You been months on the trail. You face the choice of ending that blistering ride in five days or being stranded through a Montana winter. I don't need to speak of your falling down on the job for which you were hired on by the whitest cowman in Texas.

"I know this country. I know that quarantine gang. I'll lead the Los Lobos herds over Salt Creek and straight through Denman County if you all stand ready to back up my play when I make it."

"Tom Emory, explain that statement," demanded Stuart, conscious of the responsibility reposing in him as foreman.

But the wrangler, a rancher's son on his first trip up the trail, felt no such consciousness. He turned loose a shrill rebel yell and leaped up to dance on his hat outside the circle to express his pent-up emotion. The suspense, the ordeal of constant vigilance, the desire to return home, the resentment at their competitor's unfairness, the anxiety to come to conclusions, how-

ever drastic the way, all combined to wear their nerves raw. Had the others not been too cattle wise, they would very like have joined the exuberant wrangler. Instead they seized and silenced him by the simple expedient of sitting on him. But he had given Tom Emory their answer.

DON STUART rode out to the herd close to midnight. Borrowing one of the night horses, Tom Emory accompanied him. It was the hour when the cattle awakened and stirred on their bed grounds before settling down again for their second sleep. The moon had come up and it revealed them in its soft glow, a fruitful army whose horns glistening in the moonlight were its banners.

Stuart led the way around the mass of cattle with quiet but troubled pride. On the way back to the wagons they halted on a rise to look over the brooding land. They were very conscious of the fact that this might be the last time they would stand together in the soft prairie night.

"Tom, I don't reckon you saw the Kid before he was killed last season, did you?" Don asked quietly.

"Paul Blaine? No, I didn't. I only heard second or third hand."

"You know who killed him?"

"A fellow they called the Deadwood Bearcat. That's all I learned."

"That ain't his real name," said Stuart. "He's a professional killer. Never was a cowman. Last year he rode with a herd that got out of hand at a ford on the Oglalla. When they got the brutes together again there were a few head from one of our herds, waiting at the ford, mixed in with them. The Smilin' Kid tried to cut them out and there was an argument. That Bearcat fellow ended it prompt and sudden with a killing. Our boys were outnumbered two to one and helpless under all them guns. They had to bury Paul where he lay and see that gang ride off."

Tom grunted. The picture was complete and bitter in his mind.

"Your story of what happened in Trail City set me to thinking," added Stuart. "You mentioned a certain man. Well, the real name of that Deadwood Bearcat fellow is—Howard Donner."

"Donner," repeated Tom. His mouth clamped shut on the name.

"That's right," Stuart said softly. He studied Tom Emory over his glowing cigaret. After a moment he added with subtle significance, "I been hoping none of the boys caught that name when you spoke it. Some of them had ideas about looking for him when we hit this country, and they ain't easy to curb. There ain't a soul in our country wouldn't jump at the chance to square things for the Kid.

"I reckon not."

"And Howard Donner is as fast and treacherous as a rattler, Tom. I wouldn't like to see any of my boys tackle that job."

"I reckon not," Tom repeated. He breathed deeply and exhaled the breath with a sudden, low curse. Then he said, "Well, let's head back for the wagons. I been riding a long ways and I got a little work to do tomorrow early."

"The herd moves off the bed grounds an hour before dawn," said Stuart. "We can make twenty miles tomorrow if you give the word."

"Ten will do," Tom said grimly. "And the first five will be the longest."

They headed the horses back toward the small red beacon of the glowing camp fire.

SUN up found the great valley the setting for a vast panorama of motion. Stuart's herd, rested and conditioned to the trail, was early under way. Riders had raced back to the other herds, relaying orders to close up and form a column. Already the clouds of prairie dust were shimmering in the sunlight, soon to warn the watchers along Salt Creek that the southern herds were on the march.

There were thirty-four of them directing that invasion, Texans all, strung out from the point of the first herd to the drag of the last. They were poignantly conscious of their birth this morning, and pointedly aware that they might never again see the land that bore them. Theirs was no crusade, no exultant invasion. They were about the business of earning their thirty a month and found—and of justifying the trust placed in them by a fine old man they admired and loved and who owned their entire loyalty. The Los Lobos herds were going through.

In advance of the point, Tom Emory rode with Don Stuart. They would make first contact with the quarantine line. Tom

Emory was in command, and the situation and all its consequences were in his hands.

It was full noon when Stuart and Emory paused on the low elevation that was the northern rim of the basin and gazed over the spread of land before them. A mile away Salt Creek gleamed in the sunlight, its course marked by frequent groups of willows. Summer was going from the land, but in the distance heat mirages still obscured the horizon in a dancing, shimmering veil.

Just across Salt Creek twin spirals of smoke rose from cook fires. Gathered about them were wagons, bunches of horses under close herd and knots of lounging men. Even at this distance it was possible to estimate the force mobilized on the quarantine line as close to a hundred men.

"Well, Tom," said Don Stuart, "I see they're ready for us."

"So they are," Tom Emory replied dryly. "Let's not keep them waiting too long."

IV

THE two were quickly sighted from the quarantine camp. There was a sudden activity among the defenders. Any doubt the latter might have felt as to the identity of the pair was quickly resolved when the point of the leading herd trailed over the rim. The groups about the wagons scattered and made for their horses.

Stuart and Emory rode steadily down to the ford, plunged in, and crossed to the other side with a bright scattering of spray. They climbed the bank and continued straight for the mounted, silent band across their path. Two horsemen detached themselves from the latter and advanced to meet the Texans. They were Alvin Shipman and the man named Donner. The two parties met and stopped, eye to steady eye.

'So you were a spy after all," Shipman said to Emory with cold vindictiveness.

Tom Emory was fingering something in his right hand. His thumb nail shot forward and propelled a glittering object at Shipman. It struck the cattle speculator in the face and fell to earth. It was a ten-dollar gold piece. Shipman sat still, but his eyes were smoky with fury.

"There's your hire, you two-faced rustler," Tom told him. "Now speak your piece and make it short. This here's the trail boss of the Los Lobos herds, and we aim to drive on."

"You'll do no more driving today," Howard Donner spoke up gruffly. He edged his horse nearer and addressed himself threateningly to Emory. "You don't need to be told anything. You heard enough in Trail City. We got a hundred men to stop you, and the first man or steer that crosses the line between that hackberry tree east and those willows west drops in his tracks with a couple of pounds of lead in his carcass."

Tom looked at Donner and little knots of muscle tensed on his tight jaws. Donner returned the scrutiny with taunting, contemptuous gaze. Donner was a brutally handsome man with cruel lines about his wide, thin-lipped mouth and in the corners of his malignant eyes. There was treachery in him, but no fear. He was too vain; fear was for lesser men.

"Howard Donner," said Tom Emory, "you and I have a matter to settle. Right now other things come first. I'll be seeing you again—soon."

"I'll be waiting for you, cowboy," said Donner.

"Don, stick close," Tom ordered his partner. "I'm talking to the men riding this quarantine." He neckreined sharply, and Traveler sprang past the pair from Trail City. Stuart was prompt to join him. They rode up to the mounted line at a fast lope. Donner and Shipman, taken by surprise, could only follow, and this they did grimly, withholding action until they learned the nature of this maneuver.

TOM EMORY stood erect in his stirrups, facing the silent army. His gaze took in every man. The pause gave them all opportunity to study him, to measure and weigh the determination, the force and the fury that he represented.

"You cattlemen of Denman County," he said to them, his voice clear and loud and threatening, "listen close and listen careful. It's your own interests are at stake this day. Coming over the hill across the creek are ten thousand Texas cattle. We can't turn them back. They're going through, and you can try and stop us if you're able."

"By heaven," cried a rancher, "you'll bring no Texas fever into this country."

"That's exactly what we will do if you

harm a hair on a single Texas steer," cried Tom Emory with passion. "Our men have their orders. One shot from this side the creek and all hell busts loose on the other. That creek won't stop them cattle. They'll come across and they'll come in a stampede. They'll run half the length of your country and scatter over your whole range. They'll plant the fever in every acre you graze. You have your choice. We drive through the strip without a hand raised against us or we stampede. We can't turn back, so we're going forward."

He turned suddenly and addressed Howard Donner.

"Listen, you, Donner. I'm leading this drive personal. I'll be the first to touch this bank of the creek with the cattle behind me. If you aim to stop me, be there a-waiting."

He jerked his head in command to Don Stuart, who had been listening, silent and cool and watchful. Together they wheeled and headed for the creek at a run. They drove the horses swiftly through the shallow ford and raced for the oncoming herd.

Every moment that followed was one of tense drama, loaded with possibilities of tragedy. The Texan men gathered for a brief conference in which they received their last orders. Then the herd advanced steadily, Tom Emory wheeling to ride alone at its head. The cattle needed no urging with the water before them.

Across the creek confusion reigned. The threat of fever suddenly menaced the Denman County cattlemen from a totally unexpected quarter. Shipman and his hired gunmen were determined to oppose the advance of the Texans, while many of the cowmen, aghast at the terrible consequences, sought for some manner of compromise, of delay. Those who did not take sides were shaken by indecision. Was Emory's threat a powerful bluff, impossible to back up, or would the Texans, desperate and at bay, deliberately wreck their drive by stampede? They discussed the question passionately.

Every moment brought the herd closer to the ford.

TOM EMORY rode with nerves that were icy cold. He could sense what was going on across the creek. He had no resentment for those cowmen. This was not their fight. They had been taken in by a cunning fraud which played upon their dread of fever. He felt no sympathy for such dupes as they.

For gunmen in those ranks he had an abiding hatred. No bluff but that of a killer's gun could sway them. And it was because of them that he rode alone in advance. They knew him; he had faced one of them and downed him. If this meant fight, they must fight him first of all. He was ready.

He took to the water and Traveler waded across. Close behind the lead steers followed, prone to linger in the water but forced forward by pressure from the rear. Traveler traversed the stream and mounted the opposite bank.

The quarantine party was now motionless and silent, watching. Tom's gaze swept the loose ranks. The time for talk was over. It was up to them now to act or retreat. A little to the fore and in the center was gathered a knot of men, including Shipman and Howard Donner, ugly and seething with hate.

Steadily Tom Emory came on, a Texas man facing death and staring it down. He rode erect, hand on his hip, rifle across his left arm, his face a grim, immobile mask, his eyes glittering with tense readiness for what might come. Behind, the cattle mounted the bank of the stream and plodded in his wake.

Straight up to that imaginary line Tom Emory rode, and across it. His gaze was steady on Howard Donner. And then the first of the Los Lobos steers, all unconscious of the momentous nature of the act, placed a hoof over the line and broke the quarantine in Denman County.

No one stirred in the quarantine party. No one breathed. The first steer's fellows crowded on his heels and joined him. The suspense became an agony. Death walked with those cattle and no word was uttered, no hand moved from frozen immobility. Alvin Shipman was pale with an inner sickness. Howard Donner sat as one hypnotized, watching that implacable rider in the van. They were looking upon a man and they dared not move.

Steadily Tom Emory advanced on the quarantine hundred, and slowly he closed the distance between them until he was opposite Shipman and Donner. There he

fell to one side and stood his horse while the point of the herd drove on. And the line of men in its path melted and opened a passage, uttering no word.

The Texas herds were going through. And all the narrow road across Denman County lay clear before them.

For more than two hours that parade of cattle poured over the quarantine line. Tom Emory sat like a commander reviewing his forces, straight and motionless on his horse, uttering in all that time no more than a brief order to each of the herd foremen as he passed.

"All right, Don. Keep a-going!" or "Steady, Anse—crowd them along!"

His presence, grim and indomitable, was a magic that guarded the threatened herds like a secret spell. There are times like that and the man for them. He wrought a paralysis on the quarantine hundred and they were impotent.

Alvin Shipman and Howard Donner broke from its influence sufficiently to rage at the betrayal of their cohorts. They dared do nothing of themselves now. The Denman County cattlemen were in a bewitched state of panic in which, to secure safety to their herds, they might actually have turned their own guns on the pair. The two rode among the cowmen, cursing and raging—and accomplishing nothing. The ranchers were through.

The drag of the last herd crossed the line and plodded on its way. The crossing was over. Four Texas riders brought up the rear. Emory bade them wait.

THEN Tom Emory spurred his horse over to a group of which the murderous Donner was the nucleus. He broke through the group.

"Donner, I'm seeing these herds through the county," he announced. "You and your boss know the consequences of interfering. We're trailing on the strip and leaving no danger of fever—while we're let alone. But when we're clear, Donner, I'm coming back. I have a matter to take up with you and I'll find you if I have to unhinge the doors of hell."

The muscles on Donner's jaws were twitching, working with the lust of the killer.

"By Judas, I'll be looking for you," he grated. "You can't come too soon. And don't come without a gun."

"I won't," said Tom Emory. "I expect to use it when we meet, day or night, rain or shine, Donner, because there's a Texas cowboy a-sleeping on this prairie that ain't going to sleep alone."

He wheeled his horse and was after the herd. The four Texas men followed him closely at a hard gallop that trailed behind it a swirl of dust in the bright Indian summer sun.

Through the long afternoon the herds trailed to the northwest undisturbed, strung out for miles along the well-beaten passage strip. Tom Emory rode with them, but there was no time yet for talk or jubilation, and he rode mostly alone. Indeed, he avoided company, remaining with the last herd and performing the routine of a puncher on the drive.

The cattle were watered in a series of pools fully fifteen miles from their starting point. While the cook fires sent plumes of smoke into the still evening air, Don Stuart went looking for his old partner. He had wondered at his absence—and now he wondered more. For Tom Emory was nowhere to be found and the men in each camp protested that he had set off for one of the others.

But Tom Emory was riding alone through the evening toward Trail City. Yesterday he had entered from the north with an old rendezvous; tonight he entered from the west with a new one. A cold wind blew over the prairie with the advancing darkness. The lights of the roaring town were winking at him when he came in sight of it. And full night was on the land when he rode in from the prairie and up the main street.

V

TOM EMORY tied his horse to the hotel rail and set off down the sidewalk for the Longhorn Saloon.

The bar was crowded. Tom Emory entered deliberately, but with the caution of wariness. Every man in the place was instantly aware of his presence. They stared at him with curiously mixed emotions: surprise, hate, grudging admiration—and a hard, unsympathetc pity for a man who was proving a fool.

"Where's Howard Donner?" Tom demanded.

"Not here anyway," responded a surly voice.

"Is he still in town?"

"He sure is, Texas. And waiting for you."

"Tell him I hit town if you see him." And Tom strode from the saloon.

Swiftly the news spread. It electrified Trail City. That mesquite cowboy meant his promise. He had come back. No one had expected him to come riding into town this night while reckless passions still ruled the men from the quarantine line. Reflection had only increased their resentment, for each blamed another for the fiasco and cursed the Texas cowboy who single-handed had routed them in all their strength. Theirs was the unreasoning rage of shamed second thoughts and smarting pride, dangerous and vengeful.

Tom Emory strode among them with cool indifference for their mood, entering the resorts boldly. None of them would dare to harm him, naturally, since he was Howard Donner's marked victim. They merely watched, and with his departure from a saloon, rushed to the windows to look after him or piled through rear doors to hasten ahead of him to the next stopping place. Only the saloons were open tonight. The shops and stores were closed and dark. It was a night for a killing and the town was waiting, at once fascinated and afraid.

Tom Emory was beginning to wonder with cold, increasing wrath if Howard Donner were avoiding him. He paused on a dance hall porch to look down the street. His nerves were tendrils of ice and steel. He had been going all day; he had kept going since entering town. The last thing he desired was idleness, waiting.

And then he knew his wait was ended. A man emerged swiftly from the hotel, the doors banging behind him. It was Howard Donner, grimly intent, as though the news had just come to him. He walked down the sidewalk with long, formidable strides.

TOM EMORY stepped from the porch and advanced to meet Donner. The sidewalk was empty, though the doors and windows lining it were not. Donner gave a start of recognition and continued his journey straight for Emory. There was no turning back now. In an instant would be decided which should sleep for all eternity beside a Texas cowboy on the lonely prairie.

Tom Emory thought of that Texas cowboy as he advanced, his footsteps sounding hollowly on the worn planks. He remembered a smiling, happy kid whom he had loved as a brother and who had died a death wanton and unjust that a bully might increase his vanity. A tremor of hate shot through him. His eyes were like icy fire.

And then the two were close—so close as to render it impossible that both of these two should hereafter live.

"You crawling Judas," said Tom Emory, "I'm here."

"So am I," breathed Howard Donner. And his hand flashed above his holstered gun.

Neither came to a halt, though a thunder rolled and echoed along the street, though the night was stabbed with blue-red flashes of intense flame, though death whined and whistled through the air on leaden wings. They slowed, but they did not halt. And their guns were saying for them all there was left to be said.

Tom Emory scarcely knew how he had brought his gun into action. With the other's movement, he was suddenly in possession of it, thumb and finger loosing the destruction it contained. His whole being sang with a sense of terrible vindication. His sight was blinded with sudden fire, yet he went on.

Then he was still, halted and rocking on his feet. His gun was silent, as was that other. He was looking at Howard Donner, and the killer was staring back. There was death in Donner's eyes, in horrible possession of his soul. Donner was swaying, his arms limp and powerless at his sides. His face was contorted. Then a sudden gush of blood uprose and foamed from his mouth.

Howard Donner uttered a liquid, choking cry, and with a convulsive spasm surrendered up his soul. He died on his feet, and his body shook the sidewalk planking when it struck in headlong, sodden collapse.

Out of doors and windows the passion-ridden mob came pouring, filling the

street. There was no immediate direction to that passion; it was the same contagious, not wholly sane, blood lust which still made the world a red mist in Tom Emory's eyes. He looked about him at the mob and his fingers tensed on his gun. None of them came near him, though they ran to the dead man and turned him over.

Tom Emory stepped into the roadway. He strode up the street, and a path was cleared before him. He was a grim and fearsome figure stalking through Trail City. He knew to the full his danger. He had downed the champion of this mob, and tonight the town was theirs. He was a Texas man, alone. He had shamed them, defied them, routed them. Vengeance was like a smoldering powder magazine beneath the surface of each passing moment. A spark, a breath of flame, and it would rock the town with its wrath.

No one stopped him or so much as addressed him. He walked without interruption as far as the hotel. There he turned aside to Traveler at the rail. Down the street the voices of men were rising, swelling, like an angry tide. He loosed the reins from the rail and backed Traveler from a jam of mounts.

A GUN cracked downstreet. A bullet ripped open the leather on Tom Emory's saddle bags.

The Texan sprang into the saddle. He looked about. Downstreet the mob was coming toward him at a run. Up-street two men stood in the road. They were waiting for him to break toward them. Tom uttered a sharp, defiant oath and jerked Traveler's head. The horse shot forward and on the sidewalk, making for the narrow alley next the hotel.

There was a fusillade of shots and the street echoed with passionate cries. Traveler stumbled on the sidewalk, lost his footing, and was on his knees. His breath was suddenly like a sound of sobbing.

"Traveler, boy," Tom said tensely, "they hit you, fellow?"

They had. Traveler turned mute, agonized eyes on his master. He sought to rise, but only fell. Tom sprang clear. Traveler lay helpless on his side, his gallant body twitching with muscles that unaccountably refused to serve him.

Tom swung on the charging gang. He cursed them with livid fury, with an anger that was compounded chiefly of grief. He sent two bullets streaking into them. Then the hammer was clicking on exploded shells. He shot a glance upstreet where the two men were closing in, spun on his heel and plunged through the hotel doors for the shelter of the interior.

The proprietor, a thin, sour-faced individual, stood behind the desk with a pistol in his hand. He looked at Tom with frightened eyes.

"Drop that gun," Tom ordered. "Drop it, I say."

The man let fall the weapon as though jerked by a string. Tom sprang across the lobby and snatched it up. It was a .45, like his own. He was now doubly armed and he had a belt full of ammunition.

Down the stairs a man came pounding in heavy haste. Tom turned to the staircase in the rear and beheld a startled and shrinking apparition, Alvin Shipman. The dealer had remained in his room until the disturbance announced that something was amiss. Filled with foreboding, he had hastened below to discover what manner of calamity was upon them now.

"Come on down," Tom commanded huskily. "I couldn't have asked for better company."

Shipman made an uncertain start back up the stairs. A bullet smacked into the wall alongside him. He changed his mind. Pale and shaking, he descended the stairs. Tom met him at the bottom of the flight. He passed a hand over the cattle trader's clothing, and from a back pocket abstracted a short .38. Tom snorted at sight of it and threw it through a window which showered the floor with shards of glass.

"Get over in that corner," he snapped. Shipman obeyed without speaking.

TOM EMORY listened to the sounds outside for a second or two. The shouts and profane cries of the milling gang were clear and loud. Tom raised the captured gun and two quick bullets shattered the hanging lamps that lighted the lobby. Darkness enveloped the room, cut only by a long, slanting beam of yellow illumination from the open dining-room door. Tom moved close to a window. As he looked outside he reloaded the guns.

No one was in view immediately before the hotel. The line of horses at the rail trembled in a contagion of fear. The mob debated, gathering behind shelter, whipping itself to a fury that might overcome a very just dread of approaching that darkened hotel front. Tom Emory knew their thoughts, their motives and reaction; he read them like a book. Soon they would come, reckless and ruthless, lustful for the kill. These were not the thoughtful cattlemen he had dealt with this morning; these were the gunmen, the parasites, the wolves of Trail City. Soon they would come, and no one man could hope to stop their charge.

"What are you going to do?" Shipman asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Die, I reckon," snapped Tom Emory.

"What about me?"

"You? You're coming with me, Alvin Shipman."

There was only a hoarse, choked sound from the corner in reply.

A shot sounded sharply outside, and a bullet cut a small round hole in the window pane above Tom's head. He ran to the door and looked through the opening. Another shot sent a bullet through the window pane—and Tom saw the gun flash coming from a narrow alley across the street. He leveled his gun and fired on the spot.

And then he cursed himself for a fool. It had been a ruse to learn his position. The gang opened up on the hotel doorway. Tom sprang aside, and a hail of bullets shattered the door and its frame. A great shout arose. Boots thudded on the sidewalk. They were coming.

Tom jumped again to the door, heedless of the firing. He saw the running figures on the sidewalk across the street, and he turned loose both guns on them. The hotel doorway was ablaze with thunderous flame. The running figures melted from sight on the street. Tom fell back to shelter. The charge was halted—for a moment. A loud, exultant cry taunted him. They had him, and they knew it, and the knowledge was fuel to their seething lust. The charge was regathering, was ready for the kill.

Suddenly Tom Emory went still like one frozen to immobility. His entire being was tensed to listen. All Trail City listened.

There was a rumbling in the air, in the ground, like distant thunder. And there was coming through the night a shrill, faint call, clear and eager, with an eagerness that was chill and terrible—the rebel yell. Horses were galloping madly on the road leading into town, and their riders were spurring them, driving them. A fierce and relentless company was racing through the night—lean, hard fighting men ardent for battle. And at the same moment all Trail City knew.

The Texans were coming. . . .

Their numbers were insignificant, but what avail are numbers? They were twenty-five, enough to ride against the world. The same earth had mothered them, the same plains had fostered them. Side by side they had gained the strength and indomitable reliance that was their unique heritage. They swept upon the town with one single and sufficient thought —one of them stood in need, his back to a wall, fighting his battle alone. His battle. Theirs entirely, regardless of cause or consequence.

They thundered into Trail City in a compact body, guns unleashed. They swept up the dusty street. And they found a deserted town. There were lights. There were open doorways. And the rails were lined with horses. But no man appeared to challenge their arrival. Instead, there was one man to hail it, to answer them with a yell all his own, to reassure them and set their stormy hearts again at ease. He stood on the hotel porch and they flung themselves from the saddle in the street to swarm around him.

"Tom Emory, you crazy horsethief," Don Stuart cried, gripping his hand, "I've a mind to spreadeagle you for this."

"Don't shout," said Tom, grinning at him. "I managed to keep my hearing."

"Well, you sure mislaid your horse sense. Why didn't you tell a fellow about coming back here?"

"What for?" Tom inquired innocently.

"What for! One man alone again' all this mob?"

"Well, there was only one mob, wasn't there?" said Tom Emory.

There was one problem left for disposal. Tom Emory brought it forth presently in the person of Alvin B. Shipman. The trader was affecting a jaunty noncha-

lance that did not quite carry under the baleful scrutiny of the Texas men. Various suggestions were promptly offered by hopeful cowboys: That he be toasted gradually over a slow fire, that he be taken along to the Whitestone Indian Reservation and turned over to the braves for forcible adoption into the tribe, that he be stuffed and mounted and sent to the Smithsonian Institute.

A LONE figure limping casually along the street distracted them from this question before it was settled. The company was silent at sight of him. There was a threat in that silence which Tom Emory dispelled promptly.

"This is an all right hombre, fellows. I know him. He's Mayor Glover of Trail City. He's no doubt got his hands full of trouble and not much help settling it. Treat him gentle. He talks like he's square."

The old cattleman joined the group with his characteristic cool affability, undismayed by the menace they represented in his town. In fact, he offered them a welcome which, without unnecessary explanations, made plain that he considered them a Godsend. He studied the silent Shipman musingly for a moment.

"As for this fellow, I think I can take him off your hands."

There was a suspicious bristling among some of the more ardent of the Texans at this. Tom Emory shot a glance at the old-timer.

"How? What will you do with him?"

"Hold him for the arrival of the United States Marshal from Omaha," said Glover. "I been in touch with the district court. I figured this interstate cattle traffic might be in Federal jurisdiction. I aim to find out. The prosecuting attorney ought to work up a fine case again' this lad for conspiracy or however they label his particular brand of conniving and dirty work."

"Man, we'll come up from Texas in a body for the trial," Don Stuart promised earnestly. "Take him and welcome. We ain't got the time to do justice to his case. We got four days to make the Sweetwater."

"You'll make it," assured Glover genially. He looked at the circle of faces. "And on the way back, I'd be mighty happy if you boys would stop by at Trail City for a day. I aim to clean up this town. Texas had her trouble spots, too. It might just happen I could use a little of that special brand of medicine with which you all cured them. I reckon she'd be a right nice town once she was cleaned up—Texas style."

From the outer fringes of the circle the little wrangler broke loose with a shrill rebel yell that cut exuberantly through the night and echoed over the rooftops of Trail City. It was their answer, Texas style.

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Ghost Town Guns

By HARRY F. OLMSTED

Phantom killers of the old roaring West stalked Felicity's silent streets. But in that ghost town of the dead, one lived—a white-haired old ranny who still kept faith with a tarnished star.

HOWDY, stranger. Light off an' rest yore seat.

Felicity? Yep, yo're in the right place. What yuh see is all that's left of her. She was a rip-snorter in her day but she's old now an' plumb tame. Pretty settin' fer a town, ain't it? Look yonder at the purple haze a-settlin' inter the rincons of the Peloncillos. I never git tired of settin' here of an evenin' an' watchin' it. Makes me feel humble like an' stirs ol' memories.

Citizens? Nary one, stranger, except ol' Uncle George Bragg, an' that's me. I'm the last. Silver went bad thirty-five years ago an 'the boys drifted tuh richer strikes. I'm all the pop'lation the town's got. We're a-gettin' old together, just a-hangin' on but stickin' by each other to the end.

Them buildin's? Empty, stranger, jest like this ol' life uh mine. Full uh dust an' memories like an ol' man. See the bats a-pourin' outa the Horn Silver Bar yonder? Curly Bill an' his Longriders hung out there, a-spendin' of the money they cleaned up in their raids. Chips an' cards is layin' where they was tossed when the last games was finished. Empty glasses sets along the ol' bar. Pack rats is a-nestin' in the gran' pianny an' spiders spins their webs acrost the mirrors.

Makes a feller blue sometimes tuh think how the ol' place has changed.

Shootin'? Ye-e-e-es, they was right smart uh gun smokin' but not much killin' tuh speak of. Kinda showin' off like. No, Felicity wasn't bad like Galeyville or Rinconada. Them towns was mean.

Charlie Hamer? Gawd, but it's been a long spell since I've heard that name. Sho now, it wouldn't be like George Bragg tuh fergit Charlie Hamer. You all know him, did yuh? Grandson! Well, I swan! Kinfolks! Humph! Funny, you a-ridin' in this-a-way over the same trail Charlie traveled way back in eighty-two.

I'll tell a man I knew Charlie Hamer. He lived with me a spell an' we was friends until . . . until he died. I kin point yuh out his grave yonder in boot-hill.

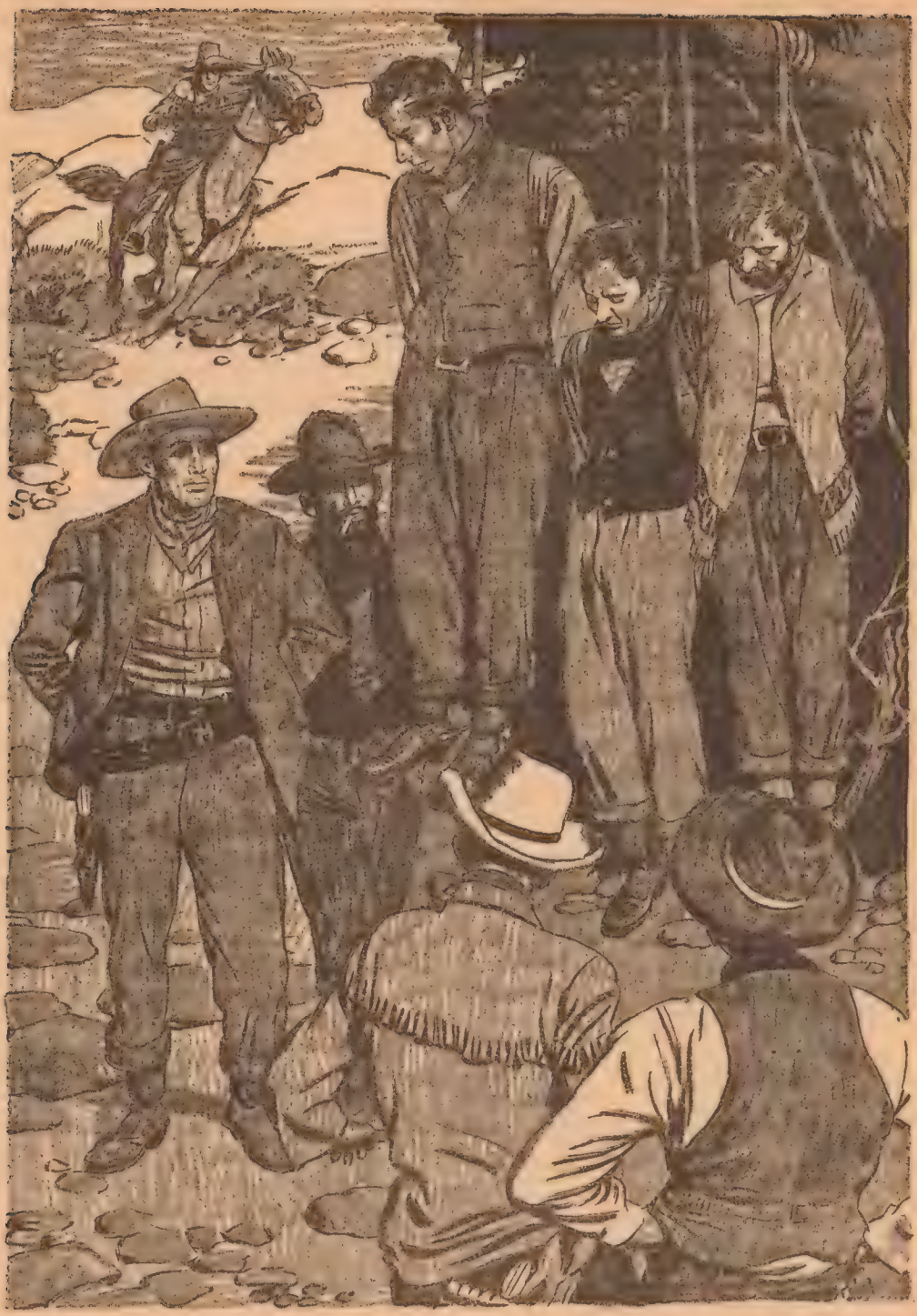
Tell yuh about his dyin'? Well, now, stranger, I kin tell that yarn, but I'd a heap rather not. Ain't never told no man about how Charlie died. 'Tain't 'cause of the part I played in it, but 'cause I don't b'lieve none in pokin' inter ol' graves. Still, like yuh say, yo're kinfolks an' really gotta right tuh know. Set easy an' I'll start at the beginnin'.

FIRST time I ever saw Charlie I taken a likin' tuh him. He bunked with me a month or so while he was gettin' his bearin's. Plumb tender, he was, an' I hated tuh see him bust inter the hills prospectin'. He shore had the minin' fever bad.

Next time I saw him, he'd made a strike an' had took a pard. Feller named Tom Curry. They began tuh run with the Horn Silver bunch, gamblin' an' drinkin' more'n was good fer 'em. 'Twasn't long before they sold their claim fer real money but it never done 'em no good. The tinhorns cleaned 'em slick inside of a week.

Charlie had made uh heap uh friends an' when he was broke they made out tuh he'p him. Sheriff Timmons got inter a gun ruckus down in the Sulphur Springs Valley an' come out of it on a board. That's how they came tuh name Charlie Hamer fer the place. He made Tom Curry his dep'ty. I was a heap glad fer them an' was shore they'd make good officers. But they'd started wrong, seemed like, an' was travelin' with the wildest crowd in Felicity.

Trouble really started when three rough-bearded hombres drifted inter town an' took that little cabin—the one with the cave-in roof. Nothin' about them fellers tuh make yuh look twicet, but Charlie began tuh whisper that they was in Felicity



fer no good, that they was *malo hombres.* That struck me funny as the three jaspers seemed quiet an' was a-mindin' their own business. But inside uh week ever body in town was eyein' 'em an' wonderin' when they'd break loose.

One afternoon a miner come dashin' in with word that the mine guards had been ambushed an' the Apache Mine mail an' bullion stolen. See that manzanita flat yonder by the chalk bluff? There's where it happened an' the news ran through town

like a flash. Charlie an' Tom was away somewheres, so the boys organized an' roared out to the scene of the killin', loaded down with guns an' ropes.

I had a uneasy feelin' about that killin', so instead uh volunteerin' with that posse, I set right here in this chair an' watched the door of that shack where the three strangers was beddin' down. It had got plumb dark an' nothin' had happened. Then I heard their door open an' it seemed like I saw a shadder slip away toward the crick.

Me, I follered but lost him in the darkness. I stopped on yon bank above the crick an' listened. There was a splashin' somewhere down below me an' I knowed that it was a two-laigged varmint a-wadin' down thar.

Couldn't make out tuh see nothin' so I wolfs down to the crick tuh do a little scoutin'. Waited mebbe half an hour without seein' nothin' an' hearin' less, so I climbed back up inter town. I headed straight over tuh Charlie's cabin, hopin' he'd got back. I reckoned he'd orta know what I was thinkin'.

Nobody answered my knock, so I busted into the shack, figgerin' on leavin' a note fer Charlie. Scratched a match an' lifted off the lamp chim'ley. It was hot an' I dropped it. Some surprisin', eh, stranger? But not half so much as what my eye lit on before the match burned out.

Right where Charlie had shed 'em was a pair uh blue jeans, wet to the knees an' plumb smeared with yeller mud. Stranger, I turned sick as a dog as I stood there in the dark tryin' tuh figger out a answer that'd make things look better fer the sheriff. Them wet pant legs told me Charlie'd been the one wadin' in the crick; the mud jest nacherly come outa the drift that Jim Boggs drove in yon clay bank in seventy-nine.

WISH now I'd gone home an' fergot it. But I was young an' plumb excited. So I takes a miner's light an' goes down into that ol' bore. There was a foot uh water standin' in it an' more a-drippin' outa the roof. Up at the headin' was a pile uh loose muck that Jim hadn't never wheeled to the dump. It was buried there—the Apache Mine bullion!

Well, stranger, I did some tall thinkin', there in that hole. I jest couldn't b'lieve it, but all the evidence pointed tuh Charlie as bein' the human skunk that had murdered the mine guards. Lookin' back, I thought I could see why Charlie had directed attention to them three bearded strangers.

What tuh do. That was the question. The longer I thunk, the less I seen I had on anybody. My pants was wet now an' some smeared with that yeller clay. An' accordin' tuh my augerments that made me as guilty as Charlie Hamer. It was shore a facer. The boys was hair-trigger in them days an' I was leary uh tellin' what I'd found. I'd rather be dead than have a innocent man's blood on my head.

It come to me clear at last. This thing was between me an' the killer, whoever he might be. One by one, I lugged them heavy bars outa that drift an' cached 'em in the willers. Then I went tuh work.

Didja ever set a gun snare? No? Well, I have an' with more'n middlin' luck. I decided to set one fer a human wolf. When I'd finished, that muck pile didn't look no different than it had before. But the first jasper that went tuh scratchin' there would git a .45 slug plumb through the guts.

Minute I clumb outa that bottom I heard yellin'. That would mean the posse was back a-rearin' fer blood. Lights was flashin' an' a crowd was millin' around the shack uh them three suspected toughs. I started runnin' an' cussin' tuh oncet. But law, stranger, I was too late. The boys had busted in an' found them three fellers asleep. An' the mine mail was scattered all over the floor, jest like it had be'n when it was throwed in the front door.

They hadn't be'n no trial. The posse jest strung 'em from the rafters an' I was glad that they was too fresh waked tuh know what it was about before they died. The boys was a-pourin' lead into their carcasses when I got there.

I didn't wait, fer I was seein' red. Fast as I could travel, I hoofed it down tuh see Billy Parmalee, Superintendent of the Apache Mine. I laid my cards, face up, fer Billy. He reared, wanted tuh hang Charlie right there, wanted a example made of a peace officer that'd betray his trust that-away. I talked him down, showed him we didn't have enough on

Hamer. He cooled considerable, statin' that we didn't want tuh chance hangin' another innocent man when three had died fer the crime already. He agreed with me that sooner or later the killer would trip my gun snare an' then . . .

CHARLIE HAMER was still gone the follerin' mornin'. I shore had tuh smile at Tom Curry. It was writ all over his face that Charlie had run off with the loot an' left him flat. That's how I knowed that he had been in on the deal.

Along about noon, me an' Billy Parmalee an' several more went down an' got the bullion. It was all there. Me an' Billy was alone when we crawled back inter that drift tuh look at the trap. We come out with Charlie Hamer's body. The snare had worked perfect an' the man never knowed what hit him. That's what had come to a fine feller from runnin' in bad company. Remember that, young feller. I'm an ol' man an' yo're a kid an' I'm a-tellin' yuh that crimes like that never pays a man nothin' but grief.

THE boys wanted tuh make me sheriff fer that trick, but I refused. Charlie had been my friend an' I'd killed him. There ain't nothin' good about that feelin', stranger. So I turned 'em down an' they elected Tom Curry to the job. I was satisfied in a way. Lookin' at Tom's white face, I knowed about how he felt. I reckoned he'd had his lesson an' would profit by his mistake. An' I wanted him tuh have the chance that Charlie had piled.

Hold that match, stranger. My pipe's out. Thankee. Lissen tuh that bull coyote a-bayin' out yonderly. He howls that-a-way most ever' night, but sho, that don't make me mad like it usta. A feller never knows what's on the critter's mind or eatin' at his vitals. Many's the time I've felt like bellerin' that-a-way myownself.

Git on with the yarn, yuh say? Humph! That's a-guessin' high, wide an' han'some, stranger. When Charlie died, that should be the end uh the story, shouldn't it? Yeah. Well, it ain't.

Come spring, after Charlie was buried, I was cookin' supper one night when someone knocked on the door. I opened an' a purty gal stepped in. There was trouble in her eyes.

"You're George Bragg, ain't you?" she asks, blushin'. "I've come all the way from Ohio to find you."

"Find me?" I gasps, kinda weak. "What in tarnation fer?"

"I'm lookin' for my dad," she says. "He stayed here with you an' wrote us about you. His name was Charlie Wells an' I'm Molly Wells."

"Pleased tuh meetcha," I mumbles. "Wells . . . Charlie Wells. No'm I can't rec'lect no Charles Wells."

"Oh, Mr. Bragg," she cries, an' there was tears in her eyes. "Try hard, please, try hard to remember him. He was tall, slim, iron-gray mustaches an' about forty-five years old. His full name was Charles Hamer Wells!"

THEN I knowed. Charlie Hamer . . . Wells! Charlie Hamer! Them names buzzed in my skull like a flock uh hornets on the mad. Before my eyes was her a-standin' there kinda teary while she waited fer my answer. An' behind her, sorta shaddery like, lay the crumpled form of Charlie Hamer lyin' again' the headin' uh Jim Boggs' drift.

"Oh, yeah," I says, laughin' kinda silly. "I rec'lect now that yuh describes him that-a-way. He ain't in Felicity no more. Went away tuh . . . tuh Tombstone, I think it was." An' what I told my conscience was that he went under a board tombstone that I carved fer him. So I wasn't lyin' such a hell of a lot, stranger, was I?

Her jaw set hard an' she got up an' smoothed her skirts.

"What's the quickest way for me to get to Tombstone, Mr. Bragg?" she asks. "I must find dad. He was accused of a crime that he could not prove he didn't do. So he came West. The guilty man has confessed and dad can come home to us now. But mother . . . mother left us before she knew. Her heart was broken. I must find . . . find dad."

Tears was flowin' an' I was tryin' fearful hard tuh think what tuh say.

"Yuh can't . . . yuh mustn't go tuh Tombstone," I says, firm. "It's a bad town, no place fer a good woman. Besides, Charlie probably ain't there now."

My tongue got thick when I looked inter her swimmin' eyes an' somethin' went

wrong inside uh me. I wanted tuh git right down there an' holler fer her tuh tromp me inter the dirt. Somethin' musta happened tuh her, too, fer the next I knowed she was in my arms, jest a-sobbin' out her heart.

Funny how fresh them memories is, stranger. Seems like yesterday that we walked arm in arm over tuh Judge Rogers, Justice of the Peace, an' was married. Say, Felicity staged the biggest chiv'aree that night that ol' Cochise County ever see. I bought licker fer the boys an' Mollie give 'em all a smile, then ever'body went home happy.

We was shore a happy pair. Mollie soon stopped talkin' about her dad an' I quit worryin' that she'd find out that I had killed him. Things went well with us. I sold my claims an' went tuh work fer the Apache Mine as a shotgun-messenger. The work wasn't dangerous like it had been. Curly Bill an' his ruffians was dead or scattered. The law was commencin' tuh git the upper hand in wild Cochise.

Little George was born on our first weddin' anniversary. Jumpin' Geeronimo, but I was proud. The boys made a lot over me an' it seemed like no man had ever been so lucky or happy as me. Then it happened. . . .

THE Apache Mine cross-cutted a new vein that assayed heavy in gold. That started a new excitement. Next shipment I brung down was a rich one an' I kept a tight hold on my scatter gun until we dragged inter Felicity. After checkin' in, I sloped over home, chucked Mollie under the chin an' tossed that chubby boy of mine. Them was the happiest five minutes of my life. For it couldn't uh be'n over five minutes when a horse clattered up outside an' Tom Curry, the sheriff, come in.

I was surprised, 'cause he was supposed tuh be in Tombstone with a pair uh prisoners. Tom wasn't the fresh colt I'd met less'n two year before. He was drinkin' too much an' gamblin'. He was friendly enough but his words had that purr of a cat-critter. They was somethin' about him that made me oneasy. Thinkin' uh Charlie, mebbe.

"Hello, folks," he says, friendly. "Jest stopped in tuh tell yuh about my trip tuh Tombstone. Great town they got there. Fine licker, heaps uh pretty girls an' a real he-man's town. I saw a fine show at the Birdcage Theater an' plumb enjoyed myself. George, why don't yuh take Mollie up there some time fer a nice trip?"

"Oh, Tom!" Mollie rushes to him. "If only I'd known you was going to Tombstone, I'd had you look up my daddy. I've written and written but I guess he don't get his mail."

"Yore dad in Tombstone?" asks Tom, surprised. "What's his name, Mollie?"

"Charles Hamer Wells," she repeats the old description. "Tall, thin, iron-gray mustaches. . . ."

"Charlie Hamer!" Tom's jaw dropped an' he whirled on me. I shook my head savage, but he didnt pay no heed. "Why, George, yuh ol' Piute, yuh never told me yore missus' dad was Charlie Hamer."

He simpered, strutted an' laid it on big. An' through it all I was givin' him the stony eye proper. The fiercer I glared at him, the more he grinned like the wolf he was. The devil was shore a-shinin' outa his yeller eyes.

PORE Mollie didn't know there was anybody else in the room but him as she hung on his words.

"Didn't George tell yuh about yore dad, Mollie?" he asks, leerin' at me. "About how he . . ."

"I didnt tell her nothin'," I rasps. "An' I reckon it's time you was slopin' yonderly."

But Mollie tied that one. "Don't you do it, Tom," she says, positive. "You go right on and tell me about my daddy."

Tom chuckled then an' he was a-laughin' at me. If I'd uh be'n a killer, I'd shore drilled him where he stood. I've had near forty year tuh wish I had.

"Yore dad was sheriff here, ma'am," began Tom Curry. "An' I was his de'ty. Charlie an' George here didn't git along somehow. Never knowed what it was exactly. Bad blood somewheres. Charlie an' me was away in the San Simon when some o'nery jaspers killed a pair uh mine guards an' robs the bullion shipment. The posse got the men but not the bullion.

"After the hangin', Charlie an' me got back an' went tuh work on that lost shipment. Seems like George was workin' on it, too. I went on a wild goose chase an'

it 'pears that George an' Charlie found it at the same time. There was a shootin' an' . . . Well, Charlie's be'n pushin' up daisies in boothill this long time now. I never heard the exact particulars. It was all hushed up."

Stranger, the wrath uh Godamighty lit on me that day. That skunk's words kinda stunned me. I stood there sorta struck dumb, jest a-lookin' at my Mollie. She sorta wilted pitiful. Her face went white as fresh snow on ol' Cochise Head. Somethin' went outa her then and there that not even Godamighty Himself could ever put back.

Young feller, don't never lie tuh save somebody's feelin's. When they find you've lied, the hurt is twicet as bad. Lookin' at Mollie, I could see my mistake in not tellin' her all of it the first night. Tom Curry musta seen what a wreck he'd caused, fer he dragged his worthless carcass outa there.

When he was gone, Mollie give a little sigh an' folded up on the floor. I put her tuh bed an' worked with her fer an hour. When she come around, there was a dazed looked in her eye an' it wasn't my Mollie, but another, that called me *murderer.*

Somethin' musta snapped in my head. I didn't rec'lect another thing until I woke up a-layin' under a tall mesquite, a mile out on the stage road. There was a rumblin' in my ears an' I knowed that it was the stage a-comin'. Jest as it come in sight, I heard a yell an' a poundin' uh hoofs. Ridin' spurs, three masked hombres tore past where I was layin' an' swooped down on the Concord.

OL' Lem Barger reined in his wagon broncs jest as a shotgun guard on the inside cut loose an' blowed the head offen one uh them road agents. His two pards riddled the stage, killin' the guard an' a lone passenger an' even drillin' pore ol' Lem after he'd h'isted. The broncs started millin', but the locked brakes stopped 'em.

It happened a heap quicker'n I tell it. By time I had my Colts unlimbered them renegades was fixin' tuh tackle the strongbox. It wasn't a hundred feet an' it didn't take no kinda shootin' tuh drill one uh them varmints 'twixt the horns. His pard let out a yawp, whirlin' tuh see who was a-smokin' him that-a-way. Then I let him have it through the shoulder. Right then he changed his mind about that bullion an' fogged it across country like the 'Paches was on his tail.

It didn't take me a minute tuh unspan one uh them wagon ponies an' light out after him, ridin' bareback. His hawss was faster an' gained a little at ever' jump. I chased him inter the San Simon an' was fast losin' him when he turned sudden an' cut fer the Chiricahuas. A dust cloud way off to the north explained why, an' some unknown jasper sure got my thanks that day.

Cuttin' acrost the circle, I gained fast but he beat me to the Felicity trail. My tough little bronc had stayin' qualities an' I held even from there on inter town. So as I topped yon rise, he was hazin' his weary hawss down this street with "damn the risk."

Doc Moore's cabin stood over yonder near where that ol' wagon bed lies. Doc was a funny ol' fossil, a good sawbones but almighty queer. Always left his door swingin' wide. Sorta like the "latch string hangin' out" idea.

This road agent hit fer Doc's an' jest did make it. His bronc fell dead at the door. He was bad hit himself an' I knowed he'd force Doc tuh fix up his wound. What I feared was what he'd do tuh Doc afterward. Clatterin' through town, I emptied my six gun inter the air an' a dozen armed men follered me. We wasted no time in surroundin' Doc's shack. Sent a man tuh find the sheriff while we augered the thing over, it bein' our move. We hadn't reached no decision as tuh how tuh git our man an' at the same time save ol' Doc's skin, when sawbones hisself come a-draggin' in from up Yucca way. We shore was glad tuh see that hombre an' tuh know that he was safe an' the road agent was holed up alone in the shack. It was me that give the "smoke 'im out" order.

We ripped lead through them clapboards like buckshot through a hornet's nest. When our gun bar'ls was hot, I halts the firin' an' starts walkin' toward Doc's door.

"Best watch that gunie," warns Doc, cautious.

"Aw, he's deader'n a nit," I hollers. "An' I'm walkin' in tuh prove it."

I WAS mebbe halfway to the door when that forted renegade opened up on me. Lordy! Boy, that was a close shave. I busted hide gettin outa range with his lead a-whisperin' "uncle," lovin'-like, in my ears. The boys give it right back at him, hoorawin' me an' jerkin' levers to oncet. About three rounds an' the road agent "caved," stuck a white flag outa the door.

"Come out with yore hands stretched," I yells at him. "An' the first funny move'll make yuh so heavy with lead that it'll take a dozen broncs tuh move yore carcass!"

I could hear my watch a-tickin' as we waited quiet fer him tuh come out. We was that strung up, that the lone shot that sounded cut inter us like a knife. Somethin' told me that Mr. Road Agent had done satisfied the law of man. I was right. An' when I entered Doc's shack an' read the note clenched in that renegade's hand, I knowed that he had satisfied the law of Gawdamighty also.

He was layin' face down on the floor, his smokin' six-gun still clutched in his stiff hand. I rolled him over with my boot an' kinda went sick. It was Tom Curry—the sheriff! He was all wounds an' blood . . . an' wet with sweat. I didn't know why until I read that note he had scribbled, words that are burned on my brain in letters of fire:

GEORGE BRAGG:

I ain't lackin' guts even if I can't play the game accordin' to yore smooth notion. You damn meddler I'd shore admire to shoot it out with you, odds even. But I can't see a kid massacreed without no chance. I cached him agin' the wall an' piled all of Doc's gimracks around him. Hope yuh didn't drill the little critter.

TOM.

I RECKON the boys that had crowded inter the room thought I'd gone loco. I dashed fer that pile uh furniture, books an' sech, heaved it all behind me until I come to a tub with a bullet hole smack through the center. My heart was in my throat as I lifted it up, an' I reckon I laughed like a fool when I saw him safe . . . an' asleep.

Who? Why, Little George, uh course. . . . Mollie's an' mine! Yuh see, I left the door open when I charged outa our shack an' I reckon Little George crawled over tuh Doc's where he went tuh sleep.

Never was much on religion, stranger, but I lifted my face right thar an' prayed to the Big Sky Boss tuh do what He could fer pore Tom Curry. The boys uncovered their heads as I was finishin' an' I saw tears in the eye uh many a strong man that day.

Things was quiet fer a spell, then Melt Selby unpins the star from under Tom's vest an' fastens it on mine. An' the boys wouldn't take no fer an answer.

We was right busy fer the rest of the afternoon, what with bringin' in an' buryin' the dead an' startin' the stage on its way again. Come night, I was dog tired an' kinda fearful of the fuss waitin' fer me at home. House was dark an' I figgered that Mollie was still broodin'. But the minute I opened the door I knowed different.

It was in the air . . . emptiness. She was gone . . . with Little George. Never even left a note sayin' good-bye. Seems she'd packed up an' hired Benny Pritchard tuh drive 'em up tuh Bowie. He nor nobody else knowed where she went.

Look? Lordy, stranger, where would I have started? The world don't seem so big until yuh figger on startin' out tuh look fer someone that's lost to yuh. No, I stayed right in Felicity with jest what I had when she come tuh me an' a achin' heart beside. An' I ain't never lost hope that she'd come back some day an' bring the . . . baby.

Been sore tempted tuh leave at times an' hunt fer 'em. But I allers weakened. It seemed plumb profane somehow tuh leave the ol' town without no law: Yuh see, I'd swore tuh wear the star until my reg'lar successor was elected an', by godfrey, I'm a-doin' it!

Lordy, how the years passes by! Mollie's fifty-eight, come the third uh next November. Little George . . . jest think . . . he ain't a baby no more. He's a man growed, if she raised him. Let's see . . . forty, it is, his next birthday.

Forty-one, yuh say? Why, stranger, I don't know how the hell you could know. . . . Huh? Mollie died in Tucson last month? My Gawd! So clost an' I never knowed. Yuh say she died forgivin' an' lovin' me? Why . . . then you . . . you must be my George . . . my Little George!

A Novelet of the Mountain Men

Stockade of the Last Hope

By ED EARL REPP

Treacherous whites and lynx-footed redskins raised the bloody flag of lawlessness. Traders died under flaming stockades. Trappers lost their scalps. Throughout the lonely Yellowstones terror reigned. How could a wild forest-girl stem the march of Marquette's brute legions?

TWILIGHT laid its mighty brush over the high scarps of the Yellowstones and painted them in pastel shades, endowing rare beauty even to the mist lifting from the river. The wilderness became hushed. All life seemed awed to silence by the magnificence of the day's end. The air was crisp, fresh with the

smell of pine and incense cedar and the stillness was disrupted only infrequently by the whirring wings of a bullbat in feeding flight, or the flat, friendly *thwack* of a beaver tail on the sluggish stream. All seemed peaceful here as it should be . . .

Now the crowns of the pines swayed as the evening breeze rustled down the timber aisles. Upon it came the ring of eager voices, the muffled thud of plodding hoofs on the carpet of *piñion* needles. And then down the almost invisible trail the little cavalcade hove into view. Straddling a tired Indian paint, Kabe Archer, lean and gaunt as a young wolf from the labor of running winter trap lines, led the way. Behind him rode an older man, a giant in fringed buckskin, his jowls dark with a short beard and his faded eyes keen as a whetted knife. In his wake trailed a string of pack mules staggering under loads of prime beaver plew, clinking traps and *possible* sacks.

Kabe Archer rode his pony with the easy grace of a man born to the saddle. His long blond hair swayed to the lurchings of the paint between his lithe, buckskin-clad legs. An elkskin shirt, thrown open at the throat, clung to his blocky torso, outlining every long sinew of his slab-like chest and shoulders. The thighs of his breeches were stained dark as his bronzed face from the wipings of his skinning knife, wet with the blood of beaver, and from an occasional Gros Ventre who dared test the strength sleeping in those relaxed muscles. Many a fringe was missing from his seams, for the hard season just ended hadn't been kind.

He shook out his hair in a proud gesture as his pale eyes found the rearing stockade of the trading post buried in the pines ahead. A wide grin curved his fine mouth. "There she is, Hoss," he called back to the oldster stridently. "Fort Greybull's just ahead offerin' market for our catch an' mebbeso a whack at buffler tongue stew tuh line our innards!"

Weariness left old Hoss Weadick's whang-leather frame and a look of eagerness etched deep crow's feet at the sides of his eyes. His shout rang down the timber aisle like a clap of thunder. "Ain't it so!" and then he scowled darkly as he reviewed the disappointments of the back trail. "To hell with Cole Marquette an' his dollar a plew, Kabe! We'll do our tradin' at Greybull an' drink tuh him an' his robbin' men steppin' in their own ba'r traps! Wagh!"

"Right," grinned Kabe. "Marquette ain't the only factor in the Yellowstone." His grin faded and a bleakness claimed his eyes. He added, scourgingly: "A dollar a pelt for prime beaver! He might've tried robbin' us with a long gun. We'll sell to Ike Collins for five an' we'll all make money!"

THEN Hoss was curbing his mount, frowning as he shoved back his coonskin for clearer vision of the stockade. "I smell trouble again, son," he husked. "Looky the post—gate's wide open but nary a soul in sight an' no sign uh cook smoke!"

He hunched his huge bulk to study the scene ahead, but his brown right paw was tight on the grip of his long smoothbore. He glanced at Kabe and found him appraising the stockade somberly. "Whichaway does the wind blow fer yuh, son?" he rumbled, and shifted his frame in a way that rolled his mount sidewise. Hoss Weadick had few equals for size even in this raw land where bulk was the rule rather than the exception. His chest was like that of a Teton grizzly, and almost as hairy. Its black mat curled beyond his open neck like dark wool and had more than once saved his skin from the slash of a Gros Ventre blade. So tremendous was he that he couldn't ride the small ponies of other men. His sturdy mount was a huge Morgan imported from the States. He didn't even know whether his nickname was a compliment to his size or his unusually large horses.

"Nobody there, that's certain," said Kabe. "Kit Carson an' the boys should've pulled in here a week ago with their packs. An' the Martin outfit should've been along by now. I don't like the looks uh this, Hoss."

Puzzlement built up in his sombre eyes. Mystery already had run them sorely since they rendezvoused at Fort La Bonte, fifty miles up the Yellowstone. Kabe had ridden there flushed with eagerness, awaiting the glad welcome of his father and the fuforraw to follow. For Bill Archer had been factor of that outpost of the Great

Northwestern Trading Company when he, Kabe, had hit the timber in the fall. He hadn't fully recovered yet from the shock of finding his sire gone and Cole Marquette factor in his place.

Since sixteen, young Kabe had lived at La Bonte and along the fur trails, learning to bait a castor stick, to grain hides and count coup. From the blood of his father he had inherited the fine pride of his calling and from the lips and hands of the long haired mountain men he had learned the craft that kept them alive in an unkind, hostile land.

No wonder he could scarcely credit his senses when he rode into La Bonte and discovered his father had been removed and the post turned over to another man. And he hated Cole Marquette on sight. He was crafty, unwilling to explain Bill Archer's removal other than he had been taken out for the good of the company. Kabe doubted this, and doubted still the message supposed to have been left to him to meet his dad in Santa Fe as soon as he could.

Adding salt to his wounds, Marquette had offered to buy his catch at a dollar a pelt, when prime plew brought five and six anywhere. With an oath, Kabe refused. He had left with Hoss Weadick, intending to look up his sire after selling his catch.

With a glance to the priming of his gun, Kabe swung to the ground, landing lightly on moccasined feet. "Havin' me a look at that deserted fort," he announced curtly. "Mind the animals fur a minute."

Strong, lithe legs carried him quickly from the trees toward the open gate. He found his pulse hammering with the speed inspired by danger, and wondered at it. Then, with the chill, blinding shock of an icy bath, his gun was torn from his fingers by a leaden ball that went winging back into the trees.

Kabe hugged the ground, wriggling after his rifle. The crack of the bushwhacker's weapon reached his ears a second before his grasping fingers gained the gun. Eagerly he swung about to ferret out the puff of powdersmoke that might betray the gunner.

He realized he was panting a little, with the suddenness of it. Questions moiled in his mind. What meant this cowardly attack? Who was behind it? Did it have anything to do with the deserted fort, or with the disappearance of Bill Archer, his sire? And for a moment he was seeing before him the lean, black-eyed visage of Cole Marquette.

And he was recalling two Gros Ventres who had tried to take their coups a week ago, and had lost their own hair. Those men carried modern, well-made rifles. New ones, and Kabe didn't like that. For he had seen rifles of the same make on his father's shelves six months ago, and Bill Archer would never have sold firearms to an Injun.

With the blue flash of steel from a thicket, he swung the rifle against his shoulder. The gun recoiled, and in almost the same instant a shrill, feminine scream lifted to pierce the hush. Ice clogged Kabe's veins. A woman!

HE sprang up and raced across the clearing. The voice of Hoss Weadick demanded attention. He had not deserted the animals and risked losing three months' labor. But he was yelling, "Mind yore ha'r, now, son! If it's a woman, you ain't nowise safe be she unarmed er not. They're in league with the Black One, the lot of 'em. Do 'ee hyar, now?"

The thicket tore at the trapper with skinny fingers that were barbed with claws, but he raced on, grinding down the pain of scratched hands and neck. Suddenly he plunged into a log and went sprawling. Before he could stir, a flash of brown and white rose up beside him and a tight voice choked, "Take this back to your boss for me, mountain man! Tell Cole Marquette I've a knife for any man of his I catch here, including himself!"

The spark of danger set off the powder of action in Kabe. He hurled himself aside, just as a glittering blade sank with a slight grating into the ground where he had lain!

"Hell-kitty—yuh spoke too soon!" he muttered, and hurled himself upon her. He had a brief glimpse, as his long, powerful arms encircled her, of a brown oval of a face, and wide, staring blue eyes blazing at him. A mass of golden hair tumbled about the shoulders of the girl and enhanced the richness of her lips.

Screams and vicious wriggling rebuffed Kabe, but he laughed through the ferocity

of it and shouted for Hoss. Soon the grizzled trapping man was helping him hold her powerless. He tossed a rope about her and in a moment she was lying helpless on the ground.

"A length o' pack rope an' a diamond hitch will hold any woman. I allus say," muttered Weadick, spitting over the log. "But nothin' else will. An' you may tie yore trappin' chain to that."

The girl glared up at them as they appraised her in silence. She was lithe as a puma, with round, brown forearms that looked capable of loading a pack animal, in a pinch. Strong, white teeth shone in a snarl.

Her dress was that of an Indian girl, except for the tattered man's buckskin shirt she wore. Her soft, doeskin skirt, decorated with patterns of red paint and colored quillwork, was fastened by a broad belt bossed with incised silver conchos, and its long fringes hung down about the skin-tight leggins and little mocassins.

"If I had another chance," she spat at them, "I wouldn't miss. I'd kill both of you, and scalp you like Kiowas." Her eyes blazed with fury, the fury of a trapped animal. All the passion of a veritable wildling was hers.

Kabe threw back his head and laughed loud and long. "Pert and sassy as a wolf pup!" he told Hoss. "She'll do for fire, when hell runs short!"

The older trapper took his old clay pipe from the embroidered leather case hanging about his neck and stoked it. "Now, what in tarnation possessed ye," he wanted to know, "to throw down on two harmless gents bent on tradin'?"

Archer watched her closely. The pupils of her eyes were so large they seemed all black. Finally she panted, "What am I expected to do—welcome you skulking renegades with open arms! I'd rather taste your steel, as I soon will, than give up to Marquette!" And the proud tilt of her chin said she meant it.

Kabe stiffened, as for the second time the factor's name fell on his ears. "Marquette!" he rapped out. "What about him?"

The girl's small fists clenched. "I hope he fries in hell, and they baste him with your tallow! He killed my father and hasn't stopped trying to kill me for the last five months, and all for the furs we've bought and paid for."

Kabe's gaze locked with Weadick's. Then both men were swinging back to the girl. "You talkin' crazy?" Hoss demanded. "Ike Collins *cain't* be dead. He wuz too smart to lose his ha'r. I knowed him well." He squinted. "You ain't Sue Collins?"

She glared at them, frank distrust embittering her eyes. She did not answer.

"Look, gal," Kabe said, and bent down to untie the knits. He lifted her to her feet. His arm went out to indicate the animals. "If we be renegades, how come we bring along five mules and two hosses? To make noise an' sell our own ha'r? No, I tell you we hone to count coup on Marquette ourselves."

The girl's hand touched the bleeding shoulder that Kabe had grazed. There was a moment when belief came into her face. Then she shot him a spiteful glance. "Marquette's getting smarter," she breathed. "When his renegades can't get into the fort, he sends men like you to buy your way in with a pack of plew!"

Before they knew what lay in her mind, she had turned and run. Archer was on the point of following when Hoss growled, "Wagh! Let 'er go, son. There's no good ever come of fittin' a woman. An' by them snappin' eyes, I figure her for a fighter from who baited the trap! We'll go on down to Bent's Fort and unload. Then, mebbeso, we'll find time to see whether or not she's lyin'."

Kabe watched ruefully. He sensed an answer to the questions that had been deviling him regarding his father, and it was gall to him to lose the thread of a possible solution. He started to turn away . . . and in the next moment a shout of derision beat up from the trading post and the gates swung to with a crash. In the tail of his eye, Kabe saw three men disappear into the stockade just before it was locked.

The girl stopped dead, stared at the fort. Then, slowly, she turned and gave Kabe and Hoss a long, slow glance. Her words were not loud, but they penetrated to them like the report of a teamster's whip. "So that was it. You were just the honest trappers they got to keep me busy while they stole in. Five men against one girl! Mountain men are changing, aren't they?"

II

DESPITE the fact that they realized they were innocent of her charge, both trappers reddened to the ears. Kabe's brain fell over itself looking for words. Abruptly, danger blotted out his embarrassment. Two rifles cracked, and the air whipped angrily about them.

They sought the shelter of the log. But Kabe remained standing long enough to shout, "Get back here, you fool gal! Can't you see we're on the same side o' the fence?"

She wavered. But there was a command in the voice and demeanor of the young mountain man, as he stood before the log and coolly rammed home fresh ball and powder into his rifle. The wildling hesitated a moment longer. Then she came swiftly toward them.

There was silence as the three of them lay flat and waited. Kabe trembled to the warm touch of her arm against his. "That arm," he said, casting a narrow glance at the blood-soaked shirt. "Better let me fix it."

She shook her head. "It'll do," she said hastily. "Well, if you aren't Marquette's men, who are you?"

Kabe told her. He went back to Fort La Bonte in recollection and in a few words told her curtly and graphically what had happened. When she had listened to him, she gasped.

"Then you must be the Kabe Archer Kit Carson sent a message to!"

He shot her a hasty glance. "Kit—he sent me word? Regarding my dad?"

She bit her lip and avoided his glance. But the grip of his hand on her wrist brought her eyes back, bringing with unshed tears. "I'm sorry I've go to say it, Kabe," she said bitterly. "You and I are in the same fix, I guess. Cole Marquette murdered my father months ago. And even before that, Kit Carson brought word for you that Bill Archer was lying along the Greybull, where he buried him. He found him with a white man's bullet through his heart!"

Two pairs of haggard eyes searched the girl's face. Hoss Weadick swallowed and let his rifle sag from the log. His bearded, rugged features cracked into deep lines that made him look tired. Suddenly a faint, suspicious moisture dimmed his faded blue eyes.

Kabe Archer's face was stony. Long ago he had schooled himself to betray no emotion when tragedy of any kind struck but today he could not mask the stark pain in his eyes. Nor could he repress the catch in his voice as he repeated: "My dad—dead!"

Sue Collins nodded. "Carson and his men buried him deep. He'll rest peacefully, Kabe." Her small, warm little hand went out to cover his dark one. Gun wildling though she was, her woman's heart was as tender as that of any daughter of the cities.

There was a ragged edge to Kabe's voice as he breathed, "I'm goin' after 'em, Hoss. Them bushwackin' varmints in there are in league with the murderers of my dad. I'll have their ha'r hangin' on my belt or die tryin'!"

Sue flung herself in their way as they rose and started around the log. "Not that way!" she pleaded. "They'd drop you like wolves lined against the moon. There's another way in. Follow me!"

They hesitated as she sped into the trees on softly padding moccasins. Then Kabe followed silently. A hundred yards away, in a tangled thicket of buckthorn, she stopped. Kabe and Hoss stood breathing hard as she dug swiftly in the pine needles and found an iron ring. In response to her tugging hands a trapdoor was flung up, throwing back the thick loam, and exposing beneath it a black, square hole.

"Father had it dug when we took the fort. He told me if ever anything happened that we were besieged, we could get out this way. It should work as well to get in!"

The fire of eagerness blazed within Kabe. "I reckon it should!" he muttered, and dropped into the tunnel. Close behind him came the others. The girl pressed by him to lead the way into the blackness. A warm fragrance touched his nostrils with a delicious sense of nearness as she passed. Closely allied with the perfume, a new sensation whetted Kabe's senses. Strength and weakness blended into fierce longing as he felt her body against his. The instant passed; she moved with swift instinct down the tunnel, and he followed her footfalls.

THE tunnel had been designed cleverly —for not a bend in it slowed them down or confused them. For several minutes they trotted down the cold, blackness of it, until a faint crack of light up ahead announced the end.

Sue's fingers pressed up against another trapdoor. She peered out, then threw the door wide. "Now!" she whispered. "We're in the store-rooms. Straight to the left leads outside. You'll find them on the sentry platforms, probably."

It was nearly dark when Kabe slid from the building into the hard-packed yard. Taut muscles rippled under his slick buckskins. The sure intuition of the mountain man brought his head pivoting slowly to face a slight sound from the wall. Against a backdrop of dusk-shadowed trees, he could make out the forms of three heads topping the wall at intervals. By signs he conveyed the message to Hoss.

Then they were moving across the yard toward them, silent as shadows, deadly as wounded grizzlies. Hoss Weadick's leonine head was raised with a defiant pitch, jutting slightly forward on his massive shoulders. He stood half a head taller than his young companion, and lacked only slightly Kabe's agility.

It was Archer who flung the challenge. There was a granite look to his jaw as he shouted: "You've bagged a polecat in yore trap this time, gut-eaters! Lay out the lead. We're grainin' man-plew tonight!"

The three renegades on the wall yelled in sheer surprise as they pivoted to face the men they had thought locked out. Dimly seen were the faces of two whites—and a Gros Ventre. But that paradox died unsolved in Kabe's mind as gun-thunder rolled tall echoes up to the silent trees.

A rifle winked from one of the parapets. The hasty ball dug into the logs at Kabe's back like a burrowing tick. The long rifle in the mountain man's steady grip thundered. Through the fog of drifting powdersmoke Kabe watched the gun-hireling wilt and thump to the ground inside the fort.

He was streaking across the yard before the echoes died, his Green River knife glistening in his hand. A double bellow of gun sound smote his ears. A prolonged shout of battle-joy ascended to the dark sky from his trail partner's lips as he saw the second renegade drop his unfired rifle and sag down.

His tall body was a smooth blur as he crossed the space between him and the Gros Ventre brave. Outnumbered still—for one armed man was worth many unarmed ones —he knew only audacity could bluff them through. The Indian was holding his fire, realizing he held the aces.

On one knee, he waited. Then, with the headlong leap of the trapper, he fired. His paint-streaked face shone wickedly with animal blood lust.

But the leap that had started as a blind rush turned into a twisting, sidewise dive. Kabe Archer felt the hot breath of the ball graze his cheek, and knew the warm flow of blood down his neck. With the rough hide of the unpeeled log uprights supporting the platform under his hands, he hauled himself up and threw a buckskinned leg over the edge.

Even as he got on his knees before the redman, he saw the glint of steel in the brave's hand. His piercing yell made the savage pause. In that instant Kabe sprang up and closed with him. Their bodies struck together with the surging power of battling cougars. Long muscles strained and snapped, neck sinews corded into hard ridges. The hissing of their panting breaths sounded loud above the scuffling of mocassins.

Snarling, writhing, swearing, they surged to and fro on the narrow platform. Craft met craft, brawn matched brawn, until they were deadlocked. But the trapper felt himself slowly being pushed back off the narrow shelf as the Gros Ventre strained every fiber to throw him.

Unexpectedly, he flung himself backward into space, carrying the Indian with him. The ten-foot drop might smash his back, but his plan did not call for that. With every ounce of strength his body could muster, he hauled on the Gros Ventre's arm, spinning him swiftly about.

The Indian screamed in terror as he glimpsed the ground rushing toward them, for now it was he who lay beneath. The wind left his lungs in a wheezing gust with the deadly impact of the hard ground. There was a solid *thunk* on the heels of the jarring fall.

The Indian stiffened, mouthed a gurgling shriek. His hunting knife dropped from

dying fingers. A torrent of blood spurted from his naked breast as Kabe withdrew the knife and arose. The savage kicked his life out on the ground in a few spasmodic jerks.

Kabe wiped the blade on his buckskins and sheathed it. He turned to meet the complacent look of triumph on Weadick's face.

"There lay three hides Marquette wouldn't even pay his dollar fer!" Hoss prophesied. "And speakin' of plew—I reckon we'd best find our critters and take care of our own." Thus lightly did he dispose of the swiftness with which death had come and gone in the fort.

THEIR packs of heavy furs—ten bundles of prime beaver and otter—found cache in the store-rooms of Fort Greybull. The trappers' eyes lit up in amazement at the wealth in the place.

From floor to ceiling, nearly every room in the post was filled with tightly packed bundles of *pelages,* for in the last six months the girl and her father had not been able to send any of their purchased furs out without danger of its being pirated. She was unable to buy their own furs for the reason that every dollar of capital had been spent, and the turnover was indefinitely put off.

In the big, smoke-darkened dining hall the three of them ate pemmican stew and drank hot coffee the girl prepared. Kabe and Hoss stowed the meal away voraciously, for they had not eaten in so long that their appetites ran away with them. But the girl had little appetite for her food. Her mind was disturbed.

The younger trapper stole many a sidelong glance at her between mouthfuls of food. She looked less like a wildling in the soft yellow light of the lamps. The golden hair tumbling about her shoulders gleamed with coppery highlights, and her blue eyes looked dark, and to Kabe's mind, unaccustomed to girls for so long, extremely mysterious. He feasted his gaze on her softly rounded throat, the generous swell of her breast beneath the doeskin blouse she had changed to.

Kabe tore off a hunk of twisted tobacco after dinner and filled his pipe. In the blue-gray smoke that rose about him he conjured up the visions of many men who had sat in this very room at rendezvous, loud and jovial in their fuforraw.

His mind drifted back to Fort La Bonte. He recalled the gay times they had had there when his father was factor of the post. Rough mountain men indulging in games of split-finger, hoorawing all night and into the dawn, taking long pulls at the jug of Taos Lightning. He had been one with them, enduring their crude humor and giving it back in equal measure. Buffalo hump stew and liquor, fuforraw and fluff! Wagh! It brought a lump to his throat to think of it.

With a catch in his throat he realized it would never be again. Bill Archer filled an unmarked grave, and his post was run by a renegade. Tears started to his eyes at the thought of that. To shake off the spell he plunged into the more immediate troubles at hand.

"I'm wondering how your dad's death links up with somebody's killin' mine," he said to the girl. "Mebbe he'd kill Ike for the furs he knew were here, but what was the point in him murderin' my father? Dad had nothin' he wanted; he had his post, that was that."

She met his gaze levelly. "But maybe he didn't have his post! Cole Marquette was factor here until he was thrown out for selling rifles to the Indians and my father took his place. Well, that was only a year ago. Soon after that, we heard he'd taken over Fort La Bonte. Now, who would put a man like that in over Bill Archer?"

Kabe went rigid. "I get it! Marquette lied about being sent to replace dad. Forged the papers, maybe! To stop him from checking up, he had him bushwhacked on the way out. But why? What could he gain when he was discovered?"

"He could gain this much," Sue told them. "He could promise the Injuns not to buy furs from any whites, as he was doing here. He even paid them with rifles, powder, and shot. He told it big about helping them to drive out all the white trappers, leaving the field clear for them."

Hoss banged his fist on the table so that the plates jumped. "It's enough tuh give a man the blind staggers!" he swore. "He cuts our throat and the ignorant Injuns' too. Sells 'em guns to fit us with and keep out other traders, thereby killin' the com-

petition that'd buy 'em fair rates for their plew."

"But my stomach still can't swaller this," Kabe growled. "Why does he pay men tuh fight this gal and win the fort? There's thousands of dollars worth of beaver here, shore. But that ain't goin' to save his hide when Carson, Roubidoux, and the other free trappers get wind of it. They'll be down here as soon as the wind blows the smell to 'em, and it'll mean war up to the Green River." He wagged his head, and his eyes grew smoky under the dark eyebrows. "It jest don't skin out prime tuh me. Unless. . . ."

"Onless what?" Hoss demanded, taking his black clay out of his beard-rimmed lips.

Kabe sighed. "It was jest an idea," he said. "I thought I could see light, but it don't make sense that way neither. But I'll say this much, Hoss, you an' me are takin' the trail tomorrow, with our double-set traps out for Cole Marquette. If the stick floats thisaway, we got medicine fer bigger game than beaver kittens."

III

THEY took leave of Sue Collins early next morning. With empty packs, but plenty of castor, they passed through the gates of Fort Greybull. It was a mission of stealth and danger they were setting out on, and Kabe's intuition told him this might be the last time they would see the fort, and its beautiful keeper.

It was a fight to tear his eyes from the golden-haired wildling as she stood in the gate watching them leave. He sensed, somehow, that her smile was for him alone, and the knowledge counteracted a little of the grief corroding his soul. Still, the feeling would not be dispelled that a strong tie was holding part of him back there within the stockade. For the first time in his life, he found existence complicated by an emotion that the mountain men themselves could not cut out with a cauterized knife or alleviate with a horn of liquor.

They gained La Bonte's Fort after two weeks. Leading their pack-mules, once more burdened with heavy packs, the trail-weary men lit down and raised a shout before the long porch of the main building. They were both bearded now, and gaunt with the leanness born of wading icy streams and keeping long vigils over flickering camp-fires. And there was a new slash across the front of Kabe's buckskin shirt, where an arrow had passed too close. From the beaded belt of Hoss' full skirted hunting coat dangled a fresh Gros Ventre scalp that testified to the truth of his oft-quoted adage: "You don't bushwhack the same mountain man more'n once—never!"

Now the big door was darkened to the frame of a French-Canadian almost big enough to fill Hoss Weadick's dirty buckskins. Kabe's sullen gaze stripped the joviality from his grinning demeanor and read greed and avarice beneath it.

He inventoried the barrel chest under a plaid woolen shirt, the thick legs like sapling stumps in fringed buckskin. Longer still, he stared heatedly at Cole Marquette's swart face.

It was the face of a man who could watch others die without stirring a muscle. In the flat blackness of the eyes sparkled little dancing points of light, like flames that were never still. The long expanse of lean, dark features was split lengthwise by a beak of a nose that dwarfed his mouth. His spade-like chin was cleft.

As he strode off the porch, a few Gros Ventres, obviously drunk, lurched through the door to view the newcomers. Far from lost on the trappers were their angry mutterings at sight of the heavy packs of furs.

Marquette was booming, *"Enfant de garcé!* So you are back, my frien's! Is it trading that brings you, or perhaps friendship?"

Kabe gritted his teeth on the words that boiled to his lips. He forced a semblance of civility. "If it was friendship we were lookin' for, Marquette, we'd be a long ways off from here."

"And iffen it was decent trading, we'd keep our mocassins clean of yore brand uh dirt, tradin' man," Weadick handed back.

The Canuck shrugged his big shoulders, while an amused grin grew on his lips. "Then w'at is it you wish, *mes amis?*"

"I think you know that, Marquette," breathed Kabe. "You've got this territory in your possible sack and the strings are tied with your own knot. So since we couldn't get our price nowheres else, we're back, furs an 'all. That's how the stick floats, if you're agreeable, we'll take our

dollar a plew an' git." His gaze was flat and emotionless.

Marquette's black eyes slitted down. He shook his great head slowly. "I quoted you no such price, my friends," he declared. "I deal with none, save my brothers, the Gros Ventres." His thumb jerked back at the grinning braves. "Their furs alone find homes in my store-rooms. However, if you care to warm your vitals with my brandy before you leave—" He stepped aside with mock graciousness for them to enter.

A TIDE of anger colored the ridges of Kabe's cheek-bones as he heard the flat lie. He was on the point of snapping an answer when Marquette's eye closed in a slow wink. He caught his breath—and then he understood. Marquette was playing the Injuns for all-around fools, trading with any and all behind their back.

"No harm in that, I reckon," he muttered, and followed the trader in. They crossed the trade-littered room to a rear chamber. Here the furnishings were out of proportion to the wild country around the post. Valuable fur rugs, a real mirror, furniture that must have been brought all the way from Independence, brought gasps of amazement to the lips of the trappers.

Then they had spun about to face the men at the far side of the room, who had escaped notice until one spoke. "These the beavers you was speakin' of, Cole?" said a tall, cadaverous man with the livid scar of a tomahawk splitting the matted black growth of his left jaw.

"They look wore out," chortled another, a bullet-headed, chunky man. "Don't it tromp sand down yore rat-hole what some fellers'll go through for a bare livin'?"

There was a rumbling laugh from the fat, red-whiskered man in dirty woolens who was leaning against the mantel. He had a face that looked like a hog's, with fleshy, protruding lips. "I've seen the day when white men wouldn't work for the same pay yuh give Injuns," he remarked. "Time was when a' redskin couldn't even spit with a mountain man, anyways you fixed it!"

A crash of laughter jarred on the trappers' ragged nerves. Only the frailest of threads held their tempers down. It fanned the flame higher to recognize these men who were talking before them as though they were ignorant Diggers, incapable of understanding what was being said.

They were four of the most disreputable trappers from Santa Fe to the Domain. In his mind Kabe tolled them off for settlement later: Rube Jackman, the lanky one; Big Leroux, the hog-faced man; Olly Wooton, the stubby son of Satan; and Blackfoot Smith, a tall breed who seldom spoke, and then only to make trouble.

Hoss brushed past Kabe, his skinning knife already halfway out of leather. "Yore stick's floatin' low, lard-eaters!" he growled, fury making his tones hoarse.

But Kabe laid a hand on his arm. "Don't filthy yore hands with 'em, Hoss," he grunted. "Not now." And he held his breath, then, for he saw that every man's rifle was at hand, and heard a *click* that told him Cole Marquette had already hauled on the spur of his flintlock. For the first time he realized the stark menace in this renegade trader, this murderer of his father.

AFTER a silence so thick it would have dulled a hunting blade, Marquette rested his long rifle against the wall. His smile was quick to flash. "Now that we understand each other, we can perhaps talk business."

Kabe relaxed. "If yuh call a dollar a plew business," he snorted. "Anyway, let's git it done. We got eight hundred prime pelts out there. If yore former price stands, we'll take it, rather than have 'em rottin' our packs."

Marquette nodded. "Eight hundred dollars. I'll pay you off now, specifying my own terms of delivery. Jackman and Blackfoot will . . ."

"Yore own terms—!" snarled Weadick. "Skin the deal out, *bourgeois,* so's we kin onderstand it."

"You'll have tuh excuse my partner," Kabe apologized. "He ain't quick to catch on, not bein' used to dealin' with cache-robbers. You want us to follow these men at a distance, leavin' our furs where you've got your secret store-rooms, ain't that how the stick points?"

Over the Canuck's eyes shuttled a dull film, concealing the threat that lay in the black pupils. "You understand quick, *mon*

vieux," he agreed. "A lot of trouble might have been avoided if your father had been as shrewd."

Before Kabe's shocked mind could register the plain admission of murder. Marquette was going on. "Follow Blackfoot and Rube at a distance, and don't put yourselves to the trouble of trying to get away without delivering the *plus.* It won't work."

Then he was counting out eight hundred dollars in gold from a big sack he had taken from a hole in the wall. When Kabe had pocketed the money, he looked up squarely into the other's eyes. "Next time," he said quietly, "may it be us who pays off. And in our own kind uh money."

MARQUETTE'S cache was in a steep V in the untracked wilderness a few miles behind Fort La Bonte. There, before a cave, the four of them unloaded the mules and commenced dragging the packs inside.

Kabe pretended to be occupied with the mules while the others did the hauling. His mind chafed at the bitterness of his thoughts. Now, for the first time, he was really sure that Marquette was his father's murderer. His own words had left no doubt. The trapper's hand clenched on the haft of his knife as he recalled the conversation.

Nothing could have given him more pleasure than a fight to the hilt with the trader, and yet he had held back, that his revenge might be more complete. He would bide his time, wait until the signs were right for a wipeout. And then, with his knife at the Canuck's greasy throat—

But it was not entirely revenge for his dad's death that stiffened his jaw. Marquette would pay for the things he had done to Sue Collins and her father. Kabe found himself breathing hard every time he envisioned the girl fighting to hold the post against hired renegades. He shuddered at the thought of what would happen to her should she be taken alive.

From the cave's mouth came an oath. "Son of a he-goat! These here don't heft like no plew I ever trapped!" It was Blackfoot Smith grumbling over a pack of plew as he weighed it with his long arms.

Then he tore the coverings off and commenced throwing hides off the top. Ten furs down, he encountered a layer of buffalo chips, and below that, branches and leaves and rocks. Swiftly he swung to another pack and ripped it apart. Here, again, he encountered rocks, sticks, spoiled buffalo robes, and various odds and ends instead of the plew the factor had paid for!

He whirled to look down the ugly bore of Kabe Archer's rifle. "Git that ugly look offen yore face," Kabe snarled. "I'm of a mind to blast you to kingdom come anyways."

The renegades hunkered forward, enraged, baffled. "What in the hell you fellers tryin' to pull off here?" Rube Jackman yelled. "We paid fer eight hundred dollars wu'th o' beaver—"

"An' you're gittin' it," drawled Hoss. "There's a hundred and thirty-three pelts among the chips and refuse in thar. That's eight hund'erd worth—at six dollars the plew! Now git down on yore bellies, or yo're gone beaver."

The traders sagged to their knees and obeyed. "Tell your *partisan* he'll have to use stronger medicine than he's got so far to stop us," growled Kabe, angry lights flashing in his eyes. "We'll be catchin' up now. Tell him fer me. . . ."

"You can tell him personal, my frien'," someone said behind them. And Kabe and Hoss jerked around to confront Marquette, Leroux, and Wooton.

The rifles fell from their fingers. They were covered. The grinning traders threw ropes about them and tossed them to the ground, helpless.

While they lay side by side and swore until the edge was somewhat rubbed off their virulence, Marquette stood over them and roared obscene merriment. *"Eh bien,* but we come of the same stock, you men and I!" he charged loudly. "You tried to cheat me on what I thought were the furs you had before; while I followed to remove the gold you received but an hour ago from your pockets!"

The trappers panted in baffled rage. Kabe saw the change coming over the factor's face in the moments that followed, and wondered what it portended. Before long, he learned.

"The stubbornness that was your father's, the good Bill Archer, has got you in trouble once too often," Marquette said, no longer laughing. "I offered him a

chance to join me in my plan, but he was blind. He couldn't see what I could—that by arming the Indians, we could keep free trappers out, even company men, and restore the fur lands to the Gros Ventres."

"Downright generous of yuh," mumbled Kabe. "Why?"

"Because the Indians, primed with liquor and praise, think the prices I pay them fair, considering that they are free to trap as they wish again. And why not? I am careful to see that always they have sufficient liquor. And a drunken Indian is a happy Indian!"

HE turned to gesture. Presently Big Leroux bulled up with a fresh horse hide, still bloody, over his shoulder.

"Just wan thing I lack—guns! And the lovely Mademoiselle Collins has hundreds."

"You're crazy!" Kabe snapped, stiff with a cold chill that came over him. What was in the renegade's mind now? "We just left her. She hasn't more'n a dozen."

Marquette smiled tolerantly. "She has hundreds," he repeated. "I should know. I hid them there, in the secret store-rooms beneath the post, while I was factor there myself. And tomorrow I shall have them, while you two gasp your lives out here!" He nodded slightly at one of the men behind the mountain men.

With a sudden rush, Jackman lurched up behind them and handed each a blow on the head with a rock. Stunned, they were dragged to a tree. Through a red fog in his brain came a dazzling light that swept reason before it, and Kabe knew what was to happen.

Tied to a tree, a horsehide stretched tightly about them and laced behind the bole, they would die the death the Indians saved for their most hated enemies. The hot sun would dry the hide out until it shrank drum-tight. As the green skin cured, they would be crushed, strangled, suffocated. Cole Marquette was a man with ideas.

"I kilt yore father, and now it is I who wipe out the tribe to the last man," he promised. "While at Fort Greybull, I shall renew an acquaintance that ended too soon! *Au revoir!* We ride, my frien's!"

In unspeakable agony Kabe watched the horse-hide stretched about them and saw the five mount and leave. He could say nothing, and Hoss could say nothing; they knew only that the most miserable death a mountain man could dread was to be theirs; the most agonizing recriminations possible would go with it.

IV

BY midday the hide was already beginning to grow unbearably tight. Kabe could not move an inch. It was like being helplessly buried beneath a mountain of sand with the added misery of devilling flies.

By craning his neck, he could just see Hoss. Once they caught each other looking around. Hoss grinned sheepishly, but Kabe saw the beads of agony on his face. "We're gone beaver for shore, this time!" the old mountain man said cheerfully.

"We can't be," Kabe gasped. "We've got to get out of this tuh save Sue."

His mind was a riot of confusion. He had let the girl down by not being alert. He tortured himself with thoughts of what would happen when Marquette broke in, as he must. Then even those bitter reflections were driven out in the pain seeping into his brain.

His nerves cried out against the torture, forced tears of agony to his eyes. His bones felt as though they were being telescoped. It was a man's job to suck a breath into his crushed chest. And he was thirsty. So thirsty the sound of the roaring river a mile away brought him to the brink of madness.

Once he heard his old side-kick muttering against the horrors devilling him. Just a groan, and a stifled, "Lawd!"

Sweat rolled now from Kabe's big body. Curses, threats, sobs choked his throat with the increasing tightness of the skin. He could not control the spasmodic gasping of his chest muscles any longer. He trembled with ague. He wouldn't give up. Not even when he was really praying for a quick death, he wouldn't admit it.

He began praying for strength to burst the tight rawhide from his limbs, knowing that really no man could own that strength. And, still muttering long-forgotten prayers, he dipped into black nothingness. . . .

A fire in his throat awakened him. It seared him down to the soles of his feet.

With a wrench he tore his eyelids open. Then he was fighting to sit up as a yellow-haired stranger shoved him back on the ground.

"Take it easy, button," the short, chunky little man growled. "It ain't nothin' tuh holler thataway about. Just a snort o' Taos Lightnin'." And he tapped the corncob stopper back in the bottle.

"Kit Carson!" Kabe gasped. "And ol' Gabe!" he went on, seeing the bow-legged old mountain man beside him, grinning a broken-toothed grin. Hurriedly he sat up and looked for Hoss Weadick.

The giant trapper was sitting with his back to a rock, puffing moodily on his black stone pipe. "Yo're late," he said. "I been awake ten minutes, m'self." But there was obvious relief and affection in his eyes.

Kabe fought his way to his feet against the dizziness claiming him. "You've told 'em?"

Kit Carson spat on the ground. His kindly blue eyes blinked on either side of a well molded nose. Weathered features were split by a grin. "I heerd about it just now, though I guessed when we come across you two pop-eyed jaspers gasping here, what was behind it. If yo're ready tuh travel. . . ."

"Ready!" Kabe snapped, and grabbed a tree to keep from falling. "My trap's out for that polecat's pelt, and I'll take it; the sooner the better."

Old Gabe, Jim Bridger by name, swore hugely. "Scrape the ha'r offen my chest if us free trappers ain't stood enough! I'll pulverize the skunk for next winter's pemmican. Well, now, I will!"

"Talk's cheap," Kit growled. "How we gonna stop 'em? They'll be there by mornin'. It's 'most dark now, and we're laggin' ten hour behind 'em."

An idea raced through Kabe's mind, left him on fire with its portents. "A pirogue!" he burst eagerly. "There's a dozen at the Fort. The Yellowstone's high now. It'll carry us down quicker'n a hoss."

"Done!" Hoss agreed. "Catch up! Put out! My stick's soppin' with Cole Marquette's medicine!"

But as they slogged down to the river, Kabe knew how slight their chances were of reaching the fort before it should fall. If anything happened to Sue Collins, he thought he would never be able to smile again. He guessed Kit had been right a few months back when he vowed, "Yo're a likely lookin' beaver kitten, Kabe. It's time you womaned, an' that's a fact!"

There would be only one woman for him, though, and if he could not have her, he would at least tear out the heart of the man who killed her.

FORT GREYBULL rang to the coarse shouts of mountain men for the first time in many moons. But the fuforraw was obscene, tainted with the brand of men who had broken down the gate a short hour before and overcome its mistress.

Five liquor-sodden men clamored about the big dining table, eating, pounding, flinging taunts at the girl imprisoned in Cole Marquette's arms at the table's head.

"Five months we been waitin' fer this, boss!" roared Big Leroux. "Trappin' beaver cain't shine with kissin' gals, anyway you fix it!"

"But the lady is particular to whom she gives her lips," smiled Marquette, turning her face toward his. "Is it not so?"

Sue Collins was past crying. Her eyes were dry and dull, and one shoulder was scratched where the blouse had been torn away. "Yes," she breathed in answer, "particular enough that I'd kill myself before submitting to you!"

Her words signalled a gale of laughter that beat against the low ceiling. "She's a prize filly!" complimented Rube Jackman, reaching to stroke her bare shoulder.

The girl flung herself away, eyes wide in terror. Again the traders' voices shouted their amusement. Marquette tilted a liquor horn dry, flung it to the floor. His lips gleamed wetly as he enmeshed his fingers in the girl's hair and drew her face down to his.

Her wild struggle overturned the chair, and down they went to the floor. The renegade sat up and drew her to him. Gradually the girl's struggles grew weaker. She closed her eyes, and two big tears forced themselves past her dark lashes. In her ears was the whooping and cursing of her captors, in her heart a vain hope, vision of one who was strong but who was not here.

Then she was opening her eyes again as a voice laced through the sounds of revelry: "Belly up, Marquette—yo're

finished! You've played yore game, now you'll play mine."

With a flat look of fear on his features, Marquette came to his feet to front the door. His men whirled, rifles leaping to their hands.

"Sacré nom!" he shrieked. "Kit Carson —and those damned. . . ." His last words were buried in an avalanche of crashing gun-concussions. Within five seconds every gun had been emptied, and now keen blades flashed and the mountain men leaped to the battle.

Olly Wooton was down, two balls through his head. The room bulged to the roar of battle. The trappers bellied to the renegades like maddened grizzlies. Kabe singled out Marquette for his own. With a wild yell he catapulted the table to smash into him. Blades locked, they went down in a welter of interlocked limbs.

Snarling, slashing, tearing, the son of Bill Archer was like a tough young wolf in his first battle, as he waged a death-struggle of revenge and hatred. Before him was one face—the white, blood-slashed visage of his sire's murderer; in his heart was one purpose—to slash that throat wide open.

Like two titans they struggled, rolling over and over on the floor. First Kabe on top, then Marquette. And always mighty muscles strained against each other seeking to weaken the other long enough for one quick thrust of the razor-edged knives. Kabe's shirt hung in tatters from his shoulders. Blood oozed from a dozen long wounds on his heaving chest. Sweat and blood dripped from his forehead into his eyes, obscuring vision. But still he battled, his fury undiminished, against the man he'd sworn to kill.

OFF across the room, Kit Carson had swept up under Big Leroux's guard to drive a Green River blade clear to his brain. Hoss Weadick's war-cry drowned out the Taos Thunderhead's shout:

"Yuh smell like a Injun at de-lousin' time, Blackman, but I kin stand it long enough tuh part yore ha'r with a skinnin' knife! *Wagh!*"

Bellowing their fury, the Carson men took the offensive, rushing the renegades relentlessly. The floor was growing sticky with blood. Shirts and skins were sliced under hungry, whetted steel. Kabe's own blade had dulled its edge on bone a half dozen times, but the fury of his opponent grew with every gasping breath.

When he feinted for a death coup, Marquette matched the move, grinning wickedly through the mask of blood over his features. Under the table, into chairs, across the room they fought their way, two men born to the steel. Then they were standing apart, panting, circling for an opening. Without warning Marquette rushed.

The haft of Kabe's knife clinked against his. His powerful arm tossed him away, and in the same instant he sprang in. He sensed that the room was deathly quiet, all eyes on the struggle as others dropped their opponents. Faster than eye could follow, the thrust and parry of their blades flashed brittlely. Marquette's back was to the wall, his face gleaming with sweat and blood. Kabe was shouting.

"Time's up, Marquette! Yo're done!"

Then the trader was sagging down, breaking at the knees. There was a bubbling wound on his breast, and death had put his finger on his heart. A dollar a plew. . . . His own was not worth that much now.

Kabe forgot the grinning mountain men as Sue came toward him. Tremulous, happy, she was no longer the independent wildling. Even to the young trapper's eyes, more used to mules than women, that was plain.

"Salt me fer a jerked buffler brisket!" Hoss Weadick hackled. "What's preventin' yuh, lad? Iffen a gal was tuh look up at me thataway, I'd know what tuh do. Well, now, I would!"

"Yo're a danged ol' fool, Hoss," Kit Carson grinned. "Keep your advice to put feathers in yore own coo-stick. The boy's doin' all right, an' that's a fact!"

Texicans to Saddle!

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

"Come and get it!" On that writhing thief-trail that cut through the Nations, bearded killers snarled at the grapevine defi. And on the south bank of the Red waited the two tawny-eyed Texans—thumbs hooked over gun-spurs and Hell hammering in their hearts.

CORYELL and Titus heaved sighs of relief as they rode their weary mounts through the fringe of cottonwoods on the north bank of the Red River and out onto the wide sandbar that glared and scorched in the September sun.

"Good old Texas!" said Titus, his brown eyes sparkling. "She's rough, but they tell you what they aim to kill you for over there.

"Why, Titus, son," drawled old Cory, "we been travelin' down through the Five Civilized Tribes."

"Civilized, my eyes. The Indians may be civilized. I ain't seen many. But, Cory —the white gents that've been takin' pot shots at us for the last five-six hours ain't civilized none. There's more chances to get killed for nothin' in here than ary place on earth. But our trouble's over, I reckon. Yonder side that little strip of red water and quicksand is north Texas, and once we get—"

A shot crashed from the edge of the cottonwoods they had just left. The bullet struck in front of them and sent up a little shower of sand.

"One shot across the bows means stop and back up," said Coryell, "but I'll be danged if I do. Come on—let's go to Texas!"

Coryell, gray and grizzled and trailwise, bent low in the saddle and spurred out across the strip of burning sand. Titus, after one glance toward the cottonwoods, did likewise. As they splashed into the broad, shallow ford, two more shots were fired, and the bullets whined uncomfortably close. But Titus, slim and dark, with the dancing devils of youth in his brown eyes, was grinning as they spurred their mounts out upon the Texas side.

"Texas," said he, "—an' old Titus County."

"Nope," growled Coryell, "—Coryell County!"

Titus, still grinning, caressed a freshly healed scar that ran along one side of his jawbone. But the oldster was already spurring ahead up the narrow trail that

climbed, through a deep cut, into open bottom lands. Behind them, from the other side of the river, guns were still popping. Titus decided that now was no time for further argument as to the respective merits of the two Texas counties whose names they had adopted. He spurred after the fleeing Coryell, his dusty flannel shirt and battered sombrero almost blending with the rusty coat of the horse he rode.

For a quarter of a mile beyond the fringe of cottonwoods on the river bank, the ground was little more than an ancient sandbar, dotted here and there with mustang grapevines, which looked like green haystacks. The two riders would have liked thick timber better just then. Somebody back there by the river seemed to want to kill them.

And then—a hundred yards ahead of them—a man rode out from behind one of the green haystacks, and stopped in the trail. There was a pistol at his belt, and a Spencer repeater lay across his saddle bow.

"Oh, oh," said Titus. "That little pink strip of difference is quarantined on *both* sides."

THE man in front of them was a gaunt, bony old giant, whose hair and beard were iron gray, while his eyes were steely blue.

"Mornin', gents," he greeted. "What were you shootin' at?"

"We was shootin' at the ford, partner," drawled Titus, "and came blame nigh missing it. Them other shots you heard was some gents that seems to hate to see two likely cow-hands leavin' the Injun country."

"Where you heading for?"

"Mostly south," replied old Cory, in the deep, measured tones of a backwoods preacher. "If you own this road, we'll help you roll it up and you can take it home. If you don't own it, we'd like to travel it some."

"Just a minute," said the big rancher. "I don't mean any harm by stopping you. You fellows came through the bottoms on the Indian side, and you crossed the river. You both look to be alive, and

I don't exactly see how you done it."

"Is miasmy right bad in them bottoms?" asked Titus, innocently.

"Yes," snapped the ranchman, "and there's something else in them bottoms that's right bad, just now. Lem Crosby's outlaw band is hid up in there. They thought you boys were some of my men, and they took a shot at you."

"Huh. Case of mistaken identity," grinned Titus. "They ought to apologize for that."

"They will, if they see you again. They apologize for their mistakes, with more lead. They— Look out! Here they come."

Half a dozen heads showed as a band of men rode up through the cut in the river bank. The big ranchman jumped his horse behind a grapevine, just as a gun cracked and the bullet cut leaves from the vine. He probably thought the two saddle-drifters would use the road he didn't own, and head south. If he did, he was mistaken. Both their guns were out and smoking. They were getting tired of being shot at.

In half a second, one horse was down, and its rider was making the best time he could, on foot, heading for the river bank. Two more were wounded and out of the fight.

The others were still firing. But the ranchman had lost the stopper from his Spencer about that time, and all the lead and fire was running out of it.

The rest of the little band of killers turned and fled, following the wounded hombre through the cut and down the river bank.

Cory and Titus set spurs and gave chase. They pulled up at the top of the bank. The outlaws were just entering the ford. The one who had lost his horse had got up behind another. Titus had reloaded his gun, and was about to open on them at long range, when Cory said:

"Let 'em alone, son. If they'd rather go back into that bend on the Injun side of that strip of war-paint, than to go where they're goin' when they die, let 'em go."

"You boys are sorta peevish," said the big ranchman, as he rode up to them. "You killed one of my horses, but—"

"Your horses?" said Cory.

"Yes. Them fellows have been workin' on my saddle stock lately. I missed some this morning. I was trailin' 'em when I met you."

"Oh, I see," drawled Cory. "Them gents was part of the appropriations committee. They weren't satisfied with what they got, and was coming back for more."

"More likely they saw you boys, thought you had somehow located the horses, and were going back to the Diamond G to get help. You two birds are trail-drivers, ain't you?"

"Guessed it the first time," said Cory. "Went up with a herd. Left Dodge two weeks ago and packed our lives in our hands all the way through that Civilized Injun country. Our lives are gettin' sorta heavy by now, packin' 'em so far thataway."

"I should think they would," laughed the ranchman, who knew his cowboys. "Ben Gurney is my name. I own the Diamond G ranch. Do you boys want a job?"

"Titus, son, do we want a job?" asked Cory, in doleful tones.

"No we don't *want* a job, but we got to get one pretty soon, if we aim to stay honest. The last dollar I seen, I bet it on four queens at the Golden Wheel in Dodge City. It was a good bet, but I had only four queens and one gun. The other fellow had four kings and two guns. Yes, I reck'n we need a job, and that's about as bad as wantin' one."

"Lead us to that job, Mr. Gurney," said Cory, sadly.

With a roar of laughter, old Ben Gurney turned his horse into a branching trail, and the two waddies followed him.

Gurney was much pleased with himself. He had picked up two good cow-hands, both gun-slinging fools, just when he needed them. He rode a little in the lead of his two new men, and Titus said in a low tone:

"Cory, I'll bet you a thousand dollars, two bits down, and the balance when I win the bet, that we're elected to chew lead and snuff smoke as long as we stay with this Diamond G outfit."

"We was already elected to chew nothin' but the cud of reflection," said Cory. "We've either got to eat, or borrow a punch and make some more holes in our belts."

THE Diamond G ranch was two miles south of the river, and just at the foot of the high bluff up which the trail led to the prairie and Ben Gurney's cattle range. It was a big outfit, but the round-up being over and the beef shipped, many of the men were away. Titus had shrewdly guessed this, and that the only thing Gurney could want new men for at this time of the year was to fight his battles.

As they rode up to the place, the partners saw a beautiful horse, bearing a fine saddle, standing at the gate in front of the ranch house.

They didn't see the frown on Old Ben Gurney's face, but it was there. That horse belonged to Vard Selman, a young man of doubtful occupation and plenty of money, who spent most of his time in Dally, a prosperous and rather wild cow-town, five miles to the west of the Diamond G.

Of late, Vard Selman had been spending all the time that he could spare from the dance halls and gambling rooms of Dally, talking to Freda Gurney, Old Ben's daughter and only child. Gurney didn't like it, but there was no fault that he could find with Vard. The young man gambled, and he went about the dance halls. Every young man in the country did that.

Selman had been away from Dally for a few weeks, and Ben Gurney had hoped he was gone for good. As they reached the house, Selman came out to mount his horse. Ben Gurney stopped to speak to him. Cory and Titus rode on to the pens to unsaddle their leg-weary mounts and get fresh Diamond G horses.

"Did you see what I seen?" asked Titus.

"Yes," snapped Cory. "Wonder what he's doin' here? Must have been riding fast. Wonder if he runs with the same kind of people here that he does at Dodge."

"Looks like he runs with our new boss' outfit," replied Titus. "This Ben Gurney gent don't look like a fellow that would tie in with— Well, I'll be hog-tied!" The dark cowboy's brown eyes were staring straight toward the ranch house.

"Yes, I reck'n you will," drawled Cory, "but what about, this time?"

"Is that a woman, or a angel, or am I drunk," and Titus jerked his head toward the house, where Freda Gurney stood on the long gallery, looking at her father and Selman, who were still talking at the front gate. Freda was pretty, and the sunlight was making flame of her gold-red hair. One hand was holding to a climbing vine above her head, and the wide sleeve fell back, showing a rounded, snowy arm.

"Shore it's a woman," growled Cory, his wrinkled old face showing none of the younger man's enthusiasm. "That gent must be pretty game to tangle with a red-headed woman."

"Cory, do you reck'n we orto tell this Ben Gurney where we seen that fellow and what he was doing?"

"No," snapped Cory. "We orto wait until Gurney tells us what to do, then do it, and keep our months shut. I got an idea he didn't hire us to give him advice about his neighbors, and the young men that calls on his daughter—if she is such."

THE partners got a good feed at noon, the first full meal they had seen for several days. At the cook shack they met two grizzled old punchers, Dave Turley and Spence Reedy, along with a few other hands. A little while after noon, Ben Gurney called Dave and Spence and his two new men out to the corral.

"Now, boys," he said. "Here's the lay. We're being stole afoot, by somebody. They just opened on us about three weeks ago."

A look flashed from Titus to Cory. Cory shook his head. He knew as well as Titus that it had been about three weeks since Vard Selman arrived in Dodge, and they had heard him say he was just from Texas.

Cory didn't know why the stealing would begin just after Selman left the Red River country. He didn't know, either, whether it would stop, now that Selman had returned. He did know enough to keep his mouth shut, and warn Titus to do the same. Gurney went on.

"We're caught sorty short-handed for a mess with Lem Crosby's gang. Spence, you and Dave are the only two old hands on the place that knows anything about a gun mess. These two boys calls themselves Coryell and Titus, names of their counties, I reck'n. I'm introducin' them to you. They can sling lead. I seen 'em do it. Now, I ain't fool enough to think five fighting men can whip Lem Crosby's gang. All

we can do is try to save our saddle stock. We've lost twenty head in the last three weeks. That's too many. They got five last night. Best I know for you to do, is round the horses up out of the trap, and take 'em out to Hackberry pens. Then just watch 'em in the daytime and pen 'em at night. Maybe this mess will blow over before cold weather, when we'll have to bring 'em in and feed 'em."

The two old punchers gave a few grunts that Gurney seemed to understand. They were about to mount, when Titus said:

"Mr. Gurney, we struck it sorty rough and we need some clean shirts and things. I wonder if—"

"Shore," said Gurney. "Here's twenty dollars apiece for you. You boys done that much work this morning, even if you ride out on me."

"Is they ary town in reach of here, where we can spend all this money?" asked Titus, as he took all the money and put it into his pocket.

"Yes. Dally is only five mile up the river. It's a little south of west from here, and won't be more than four mile west from Hackberry pens. You can lope over there tonight and get what you want. Better watch yo' step, though. It's right rough there sometimes."

The partners mounted and jogged on out into the trap to help Dave and Spence round up the horses and start them for the pens, where they would, supposedly, be safe from thieves.

"Titus," said Cory, "I've did my best to raise you right and some ways you'll pass pretty well but you're the wust liar unhung. You put on clean clothes this morning, and they's four more clean shirts in yo'saddle roll. What made you let on you was broke, naked, and a-beggin'? Ain't you got no pride at all?"

"Well, dang it all, Cory, I couldn't ast him for money to buy drinks, could I? It's been so long since they was anything but water went down my goozle, that I'm afraid I'm all rusted inside. But my main idea was a excuse to go to town. I want to look at this Vard Selman—when he's workin' in Texas."

THE horses were penned for the night, at Hackberry. A chuck wagon and cook had gone out there, and camp was made. Old Dave and Spence were sitting on the corral fence, just before night, carrying on a conversation in silence. They had been partners so long that each knew what the other was thinking, and speech was unnecessary. Cory and Titus sat on a bed roll near the camp. Titus had heard the axiom, "If you want to know how people live, get acquainted with their servants." He got up and strolled over to the fire.

"Pretty hot, ain't it, Sam?" he asked the big, shiny, black cook.

"Sho' is hot, Mist' Titus. Summer's hot enough but come ol' September, and she sizzles, right in de pan. No foolin'."

"Gimme that hook, Sam. I'll watch the bread, while you cool off."

Sam leaned against the wagon, smoking a cigarette, while Titus watched the bread. Glancing at the negro from time to time, Titus could read his black face, and almost see the wheels turn in his head. He could fairly hear Sam's thoughts clicking:

"Dat Mist' Titus shore is a friendly and helpful person to a pore nigger. Lawdy, I likes dis cigaroot and a little bref of aiah."

Titus pronounced the bread done, threw the coals off the oven lid, and dragged the oven away from the fire. Then he stepped over to Sam.

"How many children has Mr. Gurney got, Sam?"

"Huh, chillun? He ain't got no chillun, jes' one chile—Miss Freda—but she's a whole passel, herself."

"Red-headed, ain't she?"

"Yassir, boss, she are, and when she get riled, them red hair jes' kink on her haid."

"Is she goin' to marry Vard Selman?"

Sam looked all around before he answered and his eyes shone in the dusk.

"Mist' Titus, maybe a nigger ought not to talk about his white folks' doin's, but—Lindy Lou, dat's mah woman, she cooks at de big house. She say dat trouble is jes' plumb wearin' Mist' Ben out. She say he don't scold Miss Freda none, but he fair 'spise de ground Vard Selman walk on, wid his fine clothes, shiny boots, and all. He so 'fraid Miss Freda gwine marry Vard, hit's plumb pitiful. He know ef'n he say one word, she'll up'n marry Vard for spite."

"What does Vard do?" asked Titus.

"He don't do nothin' 'cept gamble and spoht. Lindy Lou say if Miss Freda was a man, Mist' Ben would just plumb shoot it out with her. But bein' a woman *and* red-headed, he can't do nothin' but jes' suffer and cuss under his breath."

Half an hour later, Titus sat on the bed roll, waiting for Sam to hammer a pan for supper. He knew all about the affairs of Ben Gurney's family, and of Vard Selman, that anyone knew and some things perhaps that no one knew.

After supper, the partners told Dave and Spence they were going to town. The old punchers grunted, like a couple of Indians, and that was all. As they were mounting to start, Titus said:

"Cory, are you leavin' anything here that you cherish right smart?"

"No. What of it?"

"Nothin', I reck'n, only we might not never come back. Let's go."

II

THE day had been blistering hot, and with the coming of night steam rose from the moist bottoms and made the night inky dark. Corty and Titus rode quietly into Dally, getting the lay of the place as well as they could in the darkness.

Wild cowtowns were no novelty to them, but they had never seen one just like this. Dancehalls, wide-open gambling, and cowboys yelling and shooting lights out were common in all cowtowns. But Dally had two other elements that were not common to other wild old Texas towns. One of these was drunken Indians, who had come across the river to get a little firewater and got too much. They shot, too, but not at the lights. There never was an Indian so civilized that he didn't want to kill a white man when he got drunk. If there was no white man convenient, he would kill another Indian.

The other element peculiar to Dally and the other towns on that immediate border, was the scourings of the world's melting pot of outlawry. They had drifted to Oklahoma in that early day from the four corners of the earth. The new territory had taken them off and they had settled in the Indian country like foul lees in the bottom of a bottle of very bad wine. Like the Indians, and sometimes with them, these outlaws stole across the border at night to drink and carouse in the saloons and dancehalls of Dally. Some of them were in town that night. A good many of them, in fact.

As Cory and Titus rode into town, the main street was brilliant with pistol fire. Old Billy Jimmy, diminutive Chickasaw, a petty chief of his tribe and lieutenant emeritus to the devil, was in town with his gang of Indians. They were having a party of their own. Two of them lay dead in front of a saloon, where the bartender had killed them and thrown them out. Two others lay dead in the street, dead from bullets fired by their own tribesmen, who were crazy drunk and would shoot at a shadow.

Not that they were afraid, but because they didn't like to break into a party where they had not been invited, Cory and Titus reined into a side street, left their horses in the dense shadow of a mot of trees, and worked their way toward the Five Tribes Saloon, gambling room and dancehall, on foot. The big, two-story building was on the north side of Main Street fronting south. To the east of it was a vacant lot, covered with a thick grove of postoak trees. Cory and Titus gained the trees.

"I've heard wolfs howl and eagles scream," said Cory, "but I never heard anything like this before."

"Some of them Civilized Five Tribes that you tells me about," chuckled Titus. "Let's wait here a minute until they get their killin' all done."

But as they paused in the dense shadows, a new note was suddenly added to the music of that Devil's Orchestra. There was a rumble of hoofs at the west end of the street. Guns began to smash and crash afresh.

It was bedlam.

The Indians were not too drunk to know trouble when they saw it. Billy Jimmy's band turned tail and left town, going east. The crashing of their guns, mingled with wild yells, finally died out.

"Somebody right bad must have come to town," whispered Titus, "to make them boys hunt cover."

"I got an idea that when anybody comes to this town, somebody bad has come," growled Cory. "Hush! Listen."

The two were like statues.

SOMEONE had come out the back door of the saloon and was coming directly toward where they stood. There seemed to be two men, and they stopped within twenty feet of the concealed partners, who had crouched down against the bole of a tree.

"This'll do," snapped one of the men. "Billy Jimmy's outfit's gone, and those other fellows are busy getting drunk. Now tell me what the hell you fellows mean by making a run on the Diamond G while I'm gone."

"We didn't make no run, Vard. It's Lem Crosby's gang, and—"

"Lem Crosby? Well, what's the difference? Don't he belong?"

"Yes, when he wants to. First time old Ben raised a howl that somebody was trimming his saddle stock, I went to Lem about it. I strikes him right here in town, and I says, 'Lem,' I says, 'you fellows orto lay off'n the Diamond G. You all know Vard don't want Ben Gurney's outfit pestered.' Then Lem he comes back and says, 'To hell with Vard Selman. He thinks because he's one end of a string, that he's boss of the world. Any time there's a chance to get good horses easy, I take 'em. The Diamond G is ripe for pickin', and I'm goin' to pick it. The hands are all away from there, and Ben Gurney and what cripples he's got can't do nothin' but cuss and wonder."

"Lem said that, did he, Burl?"

"Shore he did. He said a whole lot more than that, and—"

"Well, I'll show him that I'm the end of a strong enough string to tie him. He's going out of business on this border."

"Hey, Vard, we can't take Lem Crosby's gang on. They'll eat us up like a biscuit. Anyway, if you put them out, they won't be nobody to feed the Texas end of our snake."

"Now, see here, Burl," snapped Selman, "get this straight. I'm boss of the Texas end of that snake you talk about. I've got business with the Diamond G, but it is not stealing horses. When a man steals a Diamond G horse, he's stealing from me, and stealing more than horses. I'm just getting Ben Gurney used to the idea of me being his son-in-law. If I can put that through, I'm going to quit this game. It's going to play out pretty soon, anyway. The Indian country won't be a hiding place much longer."

"I know, Vard, but this is a right-now case. Lem's boys taken another helpin' of Diamond G horses last night, and they aim to ride out there and clean the trap tonight."

"They won't do anything of the kind. You get as many of our boys together as you can. We'll stop Lem's outfit when they cross the river, and we'll talk it over with them. I'll go by and tell Ben Gurney that I've got a hunch a raid's going to be made on his horses. That'll make me solid with him. Come on. There's no time to lose. Lem's gang will cross to this side about midnight."

Vard Selman and his man, Burl, went back into the saloon.

"Huh," grunted Cory. "So Mr. Selman is the Texas end of the snake that crawls back and forth from Texas to Kansas, moving stolen horses up and down. But he's too nice to rob Freda Gurney's daddy!"

He spat in disgust.

"Nice, hell!" Titus' brown eyes were blazing. "He aims to rob old Ben Gurney of everything he's got, gal and all. He's double-crossin' his own gang, and don't aim to split with 'em. I want to see that little party. Some thieves are going to fall out, and—"

"Titus, son, if we bust into that deal, we're going to get squashed. Old Ben Gurney hired us to keep the wolfs off'n his ponies. We better get a flat pint of good drinking whiskey, and go on back to them pens, where we belong."

"But, Cory, we're eatin' Gurney's grub, and drawing his money, and we ought to go tell him what we know."

"Yes, and probably get shot for doing it."

"Nope. Gurney don't like Vard Selman, and he'd like to have an excuse to throw some lead into him."

"Maybe, but Vard going to the house and putting him on guard against the Crosby gang ain't no excuse for man-slaughter."

"It would be, if he knowed the facts. Come on. Let's take a little *pasear* about this lovely village, get a few drinks, then ride for the Diamond G and speak our little piece to old Ben Gurney."

A FEW minutes later, Cory and Titus walked boldly into the Five Tribes Saloon. No one seemed to notice them. The dozen or more wild riders who had run the Indians out of town were at the bar, drinking, having plenty of fun. The only person in the place Cory and Titus knew was Vard Selman. And Mr. Selman was at work.

By the time the two saddle-drifters had poured their second drink, they knew what the lay was. These men who ran the Indians out of town were border outlaws that Vard Selman could and did control. Selman and the man called Burl were now getting them ready for a job that they clearly didn't like. They were talking to three of the men, within a few feet of Cory and Titus.

"There won't be more than a dozen of Lem's gang come across," Vard was saying. "We'll go by and get Old Man Ben and his cripples, and that'll show Lem we mean business."

"Vard, you've gone crazy," said one of the men. "If any of Lem Crosby's outfit ever see us working with Gurney, they'll clean us up."

"No they won't. It's come to a showdown. Lem has got to be put right. We're going to clean them up, *first*. Come on. Let's ride."

It was just then that Titus let a look of too much interest creep into his eyes, and Burl caught it.

"See here, partner," he snarled, stepping toward Titus, "you're a stranger in Dally, I reck'n."

"Shore am," replied Titus, coolly.

"Well, this is a wide-open old town, but they's some things it can't stand for. One of 'em is strangers snoopin' around, eavesdroppin' and tryin' to get into somebody else's business."

"If that's true, it's a wonder, you ain't been killed four-five times," drawled Cory.

Vard Selman saw the row coming up, and meant to stop it. He needed all his men that night, and besides, he had no time to lose. But Vard was too late.

Burl went for his gun. Then Vard Selman and his killers got a surprise. The two rusty, bewhiskered saddle-drifters backed toward the front door, side by side. Burl fired but one shot, and that bullet went into the floor at Cory's feet —because Burl was dead when he fired it.

When Cory and Titus backed out the front door, the house was full of smoke, the lights were out, Burl was dead on the floor, and two others badly wounded. They ran across the vacant lot, through the trees, reached their horses, and stopped to see what would happen.

A few minutes later, a hand of horsemen rode east out of town.

"That was a fool play that Burl made, and he got killed for it," Vard Selman was saying. "I want you boys to remember that we've got trouble enough without hunting any. When we get to the trail fork, I'll go on to the Diamond G. You fellows take the river trail. When you get to the open bottom this side the river, stop and wait until I come. If Crosby's men come before I do, stop them and tell them to wait. I want to talk to them."

"Here's where we see a nice party," said Titus, as they slipped into their saddles.

"Here's where we better get on back to them pens and nurse old Ben Gurney's ponies," growled Cory.

"Oh, come on, Cory. Let's have a little fun. They don't know the horses are gone. They think they are still in the trap."

"All right," snapped Cory, "hit the trail and follow them fellows. We don't know the way. You're goin' to get us both killed some time. Just as well be now as any."

CORY and Titus were a little way behind Selman and his men when they halted at the trail fork. They stopped and pulled into the shadows. A moment later the main party took the trail to the river and Vard rode on toward Gurney's house, alone. When he stopped at the gate and hailed the house, the two saddle-drifters were in the shadow of some trees, fifty feet away. They heard old Ben Gurney call from the house.

"Who's there?"

"It's Vard Selman, Mr. Gurney," they heard Selman reply. "I want to speak to you on an important matter."

"All right. I'll be out in a minute."

Titus nudged Cory.

"That old bird has got nerve to come out when somebody hails the house at this time of night," whispered Titus. "If I

lived in this bend, I'd shut the door and stop the keyhole, when night comes."

"Hush. Listen!"

"What is it, Vard?" asked Gurney, at the gate.

"Why, Mr. Gurney, I've got it straight that some of Lem Crosby's gang are coming across the river to clean your horse trap tonight. I come out to tell you about it. Some more of the boys from town came out with me. They've gone on to the river and maybe we can stop those fellows there."

"It's shore white of you to let me know about it, Vard," said Gurney. "My men are all out at the pens, but I'll be with you soon as I can put on some more clothes and get my horse."

"All right, Mr. Gurney. Too bad you haven't got more men, but we can hold them, maybe. I think they'll turn back when they find they're being watched. I'll ride on and join the other boys. You'll find us at the edge of the open bottom."

Gurney went back to the house to get his hat and spurs. Vard Selman rode away toward the river.

"Come on, Cory," whispered Titus. "Let's don't miss the party."

THEY rode on after Selman, and when he joined his men at the edge of the open bottom, they pulled in behind a grapevine to one side of the trail, and sat listening. Not more than five minutes passed until the thud of hoofs was heard on the trail, coming from the river.

"Hold on a minute," called Selman.

"Who the hell are you?" came a growling voice from the darkness.

"I'm Vard Selman, and I want to talk to you fellows."

"All right, Vard. What are you doing out here in these bottoms? Trying to beat us to them Diamond G horses?"

"No. I came down here to turn you back. I want you to let Gurney's horses alone."

"Oh, you do," sneered the leader of Crosby's men. "When did you join the church? We got orders from Lem Crosby to clean Ben Gurney's horse trap tonight, and we're going to do it."

"No, you're not," replied Selman, calmly. "You've got orders from me to let those horses alone. Ben Gurney himself will be here in a few minutes, and—"

"How do you know he will?"

"I told him to come."

"The devil you say!" snarled the leader. "Are you playing in with Gurney against us?"

"I am this time, because I don't want Gurney's horses stolen. He'll be here directly, and you know him. When he comes, he'll come smoking. You better ride while you can."

"We ain't goin' back without them horse stock," snapped the leader. "We do what Lem tells us to do. Either throw in with us and help us get 'em, like you ought to, or get out of our way—like you've got to. I don't argue no more. The next thing's smoke with me."

"If nothing but smoke will do you, you can get it, but—"

Selman broke off, as two guns crashed a little to one side of the trail. The bullets whined low over the heads of Crosby's men. No one was hit, but the Crosby killers poured a smashing volley into Selman's riders. In half a second guns were roaring among those green haystacks, horses were plunging, and men cursing. The two bands were mingled together, and shooting it out.

Two hundred yards away, Cory and Titus stopped their horses in the edge of the timber.

"Titus," said Cory, "you're going to start a fight some time, lettin' yo' gun go off accidental that way."

" 'Fraid I will," chuckled Titus. "Them fellows are acting sorty cross right now. I wouldn't wonder relations gets plumb severed between them two layouts over this mess."

THE firing moved toward the river. Crosby's men were giving back—not because they were whipped, but because there was now no chance to get the horses. Vard Selman, they thought, had lied about letting Gurney know they were coming, but after all that bombardment, the Diamond G outfit would be on the lookout.

When the firing ceased, Crosby's men crossed the river. Selman's men took another trail and tore back toward Dally. Vard Selman didn't want Old Ben Gurney to know who those "boys from town" were, who had come out to protect the property

of an honest ranchman. The fact was, they were all outlaws from across the river, who worked with Selman's organization, the same as Crosby's gang had been doing, until the last few days. Selman took the trail back to the Diamond G and met Ben Gurney in the edge of the timber.

Ben reined in his mount.

"Hello, that you, Vard?" called the ranchman.

"Yes, sir," replied Selman, pulling up near Gurney.

"Had a ruckus, didn't you?"

"Little one."

"Anybody hurt?"

"I don't know, sir. We fought all among the grapevines. It's so dark you can't see anything. I rode onto one dead horse in the trail, close to the river. We'll have to take a look in the morning, and if anybody's dead, we can bury them then."

"Where's the rest of your outfit?"

"Oh, they were just a gang of cowboys that happened to be in town, and came a rearin' as soon as I told 'em what was going to happen. When the fight was over, they took the river trail and went on back to town to finish the drunk they'd started."

"I'd shore like to have seen 'em and thank 'em for running that gang off. You do that for me, Vard, whenever you see 'em. Better come on and go back to the ranch with me now. Then, in the morning, we'll look the layout over, and bury what needs buryin'."

"Thank you, Mr. Gurney, but I can't do that. I have some important business in town. I'll ride with you to the forks of the trail, then if I can, I'll come out again in the morning."

They rode away toward the ranch, and when they were out of hearing, Cory said:

"Titus, we've jumped a tiger, and I'll bet fo' bits he scratches us before this mess is over. Vard Selman didn't recognize us in that nice, civilized saloon, but he'll know we are the ones that ruined his chore boy, when he sees us again. Next time I meet Mr. Selman, I aim to kill him fust, and say good mornin' to his corpse."

Titus shook his black head.

"Cory, that bird ain't no common killer. He's one end of the line of thieves that runs from Texas to Kansas. When we seen him in Dodge, he was up there taking a look at the other end. Any man as cool as he is, is one dangerous bad hombre. He's smooth enough to play that game right here at Dally, and old man Ben not get wise. But he'll get wise now."

"How come?"

"Why, we'll tell him."

"Titus, I don't see how you could associate with me so long and still not have no sense at all. Ben Gurney knows Vard Selman run the Crosby gang off. He seen him do it. He knows Selman, or thinks he does. Selman has got on store clothes, and has had a haircut since the spring roundup. We ain't. If we go up there and tell him a story about following Selman and his killers all the way from Dally and starting the fight for them, he'll just shoot us for two of the biggest liars in the world. Then two fine, likely cowpunchers will sleep the rest of the time in a lowly, unmarked grave in Red River bottoms."

"I'll chance that," snapped Titus. "Come on. Let's get to the ranch before he beds down again. If he'll just listen to me, I'll convince him."

"Yes, I reck'n you can," sighed Cory, wearily. "You ought to be able to tell the truth right well. You can tell a lie more like the truth, than ary man I ever seen. But, Titus. You're overlookin' a bet."

"What is it?"

"A red-headed woman. Best I can make out, she thinks she wants to marry Selman. Convincin' Ben Gurney ain't goin' to do no good, unless you convince her. If you ain't got no more sense than to think a woman that's in love with a man, and a red-headed woman at that, is going to believe anything against that man, I'd just as well shoot you now."

"Shut up and come on," snapped Titus, and led the way on to the Diamond G.

III

BEN GURNEY was unsaddling his horse when the partners rode up. He whirled about, and they heard his Colt's forty-five click in the darkness.

"Who's that?"

"Cory and me," replied Titus.

"What are you fellows doing here? Anything wrong with the horses?"

"No, sir. They were in the pen and

sleeping sound when we left 'em, but— We want to talk to you some, Mr. Gurney."

"All right," said Old Ben. "Come on to the bunkshack, where we can make a light. I like to look at a man when he talks to me." They entered the bunkhouse and lit a lamp. Gurney sat down. "Go ahead now and talk."

"Well, it's about this fellow Vard Selman."

"Oh, it is? What about him?"

"Nothin' much, only he's the king pin of a thief outfit that—"

"Hold on!" thundered Ben Gurney. "I hired you to watch my horses, and not to pack tales to me about my neighbors. I happen to know that Vard Selman is square. Him and some more boys ran a gang of Lem Crosby's thieves and killers away from my range a little while ago. So, you can save yo' breath, if you ain't got nothing else to talk about but that. I know they had a fight, for I heard the shots."

"I done better than that," drawled Titus. "I started the fight for 'em."

"You started it? What do you mean?"

"Listen, Mister Gurney. Cory and me is just plain saddle-tramps, but we're on the level, and we know you're on the level. If you'll let me, I'll tell you things you don't know, and some you don't even suspect. Do you know they's a thief trail, called the Old Whiskey Trail, that runs through the Indian country from Texas to Kansas?"

"Ought to know it," grunted Gurney. "Enough of my horses have been run over it in the last twenty years to wear it down a foot. What of it?"

"Well, it just writhes and twists across that Indian country like a snake. Sometimes its head is in Kansas, its tail in Texas. Just now it's switched around and its head is in Texas. I'd like to talk to you some about that head, if—"

"I don't know what you're driving at," declared Gurney, "but go ahead."

TITUS told him just what had happened from the time he and Cory rode into Dally. He told what he had heard Vard Selman say to Burl. He told things that Gurney himself had said to Vard Selman at the gate, and again in the bottom after the fight, to prove that he was telling the truth.

When he had finished, Ben Gurney sat for a full minute without speaking.

And while he waited in silence, Titus was staring at one of the small, high, open windows of the bunkshack. He started violently, but no one noticed him. What he had seen was part of a white face and some red hair at that window. Obviously, Freda had been eavesdropping, and had heard the whole story.

The question was, would she tell Vard Selman about it the first time she saw him, and gum the whole deck before the game was fairly started? Titus shrugged his shoulders. He had done his best. Maybe, though, he'd let his mouth go off too soon. Maybe it would've been better to wait and—

Ben Gurney interrupted his thoughts.

"If you boys have got this thing straight, and it looks like you have," the old rancher said slowly, "I'm in the worst hole I've been in since I located the Old Diamond G thirty year ago. If Selman is what you say he is, he's got the power to smash us, and he's got the cold nerve to do it. It's off season. I have few men, and it would be hard to get more of the right kind just now. Ordinary cowhands wouldn't do us much good. If this thing ever comes to a war between the gangs on the other side and the Diamond-G, we are helpless."

"We shore are," said Titus. "It mustn't come to that. Get the snake's head and get it first. Vard Selman is its head. Get him."

Gurney frowned.

"How are you going to get him? You boys have heard all this, but the fact remains that Selman came here and stopped Crosby's outfit from raiding us tonight. There's not a single thing that Vard Selman has ever done since he's been in this country that you can lay a finger on."

"I got an idea that if he ever sees Cory and me again, he'll do something," grinned Titus.

"Well," said Gurney, wearily, "all we can do now is watch our horses and wait for their next move."

A FEW minutes later Cory and Titus mounted and set out for Hackberry pens. When they reached camp, it was

well after midnight. They rode around the pen, saw that the horses had not been disturbed, then rode out into the prairie, and stopped. Not a dozen words had been spoken between them since they left the Diamond G. Each of them had been thinking. Now, as they rolled smokes, Cory said:

"Titus, we've rid into a trap. You convinced old man Ben, all right. He's apt to start something, and this Vard boy is going to sic his dogs on us. If old man Ben don't blow up too quick and tell the girl, so she can go and tell Selman, we might—"

"The girl already knows it," said Titus, in a rueful tone.

"What! Already knows it?" gasped Cory.

"Yes. She was standing at the window, with her ears wide open, while I was telling the old man."

"What the blazes did you tell him for, if you knowed that? Don't you know that when a woman's in love, she ain't got no sense—or a man either, for that matter?"

"Yes, I know them things, but I didn't know that red-headed girl was at the window, until I had finished the yarn and looked up."

"Come on," said Cory. "Let's rope out our own mounts and ride from here. As soon as that girl sees Selman, she's goin' to spill the works. Then Selman is goin' to set the dogs on us, and get us. We ought to be plumb in the middle of Coryell County by tomorrow night."

"No," snapped Titus. "You can ride if you want to. Right here I stick. I don't like the way that Vard Selman is built. If he jumps me, I'm goin' to take him apart and fix him over. You said a man didn't have no sense when he was in love. Maybe it'll work on Vard."

"Huh. That cold-blooded hellion ain't in love with nothin' but Ben Gurney's money—and that don't make 'em crazy, only like a fox."

"Maybe you're right. The point is I'm goin' to stay, and—"

"I hope you didn't misunderstand me, son," drawled Cory, in ministerial tones. "I didn't mean to say that a man had to be in love, in order to be a fool. If we stick with this outfit in the face of what we know, we get a plumb fool's diploma."

"Oh, shut up, Cory," snapped Titus. "You never quit a man and left him in the hole in yo' life. You're just jockeyin' for position, so you can say, 'I told you so,' if anything slips. Come on. Let's go to camp and get a little shuteye before morning."

The two saddle-drifters had spread their blankets and were removing their boots, when old Cory stopped, witih a boot half off and sat listening a moment.

"Hear that?" he asked, as he drew the boot back on and stood up.

"Yes, I hear it," snapped Titus. "Sounds pretty much like a dozen horses, and somebody's riding 'em. Wake Dave and Spence quick!"

ABOUT a minute later the two old punchers were up and four of them stood in a group near the pens.

"Huh. I don't hear nothin'," grunted Dave. "Reck'n it was just some outfit passin'."

"Nobody's got any business passing here this time of night," replied Titus. "It's almost daybreak. Let's get around that pen."

Titus woke Sam and told him to crawl into his wagon and keep still if anything started. The frightened negro, still half asleep, lost no time burrowing down to safety in the chuck wagon. It didn't know what was about to happen, but he did know that any time his white folks saw boogers, he was scared to death.

The four men took position around the outside of the pen to wait and listen. The sound of a single horse, moving slowly and coming up a draw from the south, could be faintly heard. Abruptly it stopped.

The gate was on the south side, and lanky Old Cory was crouched against the fence near it. The chain on the gate clinked. Someone who was not familiar with the fastening was trying to open it. Cory knew plenty about handling stock. The rustlers had stopped down that draw. One had ridden nearer, then left his horse, and crept up to open the gate. He meant to stampede the horses out of the pen, then run back to his horse. Pretty slick, if the men in the camp had all been asleep. But they were very much awake.

As the man bent over the gate-chain,

Cory crept up and struck with his gun. The fellow went down and lay still, without a moan.

Titus ran around to where they were. In two minutes, the man was gagged, bound, and thrown under the wagon.

Dave and Spence, who were on the other side of the pen, were told what had happened.

"We better get inside," said old Dave. "If the rest of 'em come, they'll come a smokin'."

They were barely settled inside the big pen and the horses quieted down, when they heard a number of mounted men moving up the draw. A moment later the raiders came across the open ground with a rush and pulled up within fifty feet of the gate.

"I DON'T know what became of Scotty," said the leader. "His horse is in the draw. One of you boys open that gate. Nobody in the camp but cripples. We'll show Vard whether we can take Diamond G horses or not. Come on."

They started for the gate, and they had a fine working light, for that side of the pen suddenly blazed. Two of them tumbled from their saddles. The others opened fire, but could hit nothing but the corral fence, which was still blazing. It was so hot, in fact, that Crosby's men couldn't face it any longer. They turned and fled, with bullets singing about them like mad bees.

It was growing lighter by this time, and the defenders could see the two men who lay on the ground. Cory and Titus went out to look them over.

"Huh. Plumb ruint," growled Cory. "We can't find out nothin' from them. Let's look at the gent under the wagon." Cory stomped on ahead.

They all went around to the camp. Titus called Sam, and the cook crawled out and made a fire for light. The gag was removed from the man's mouth, and he sat up on the ground and looked about him groggily.

"Did Vard Selman tell Ben Gurney we was goin' to make a drive on the Diamond G horses tonight?" he asked.

"Shore he did," replied Titus. "I heard him tell you fellers that."

"I know he did, but he's a dirty, double-crossin' liar, and we didn't believe it, so we doubled back."

Titus gave the thief a version of Vard Selman's traitorous behavior that was likely to set Lem Crosby and his men thirsting for Selman's blood, if they ever heard it. He was just putting the finishing touches on a tale that would have made a fictionist green with envy, when the horses began snorting and running about the pen.

"Quick, fellers," snapped Titus. "I'll watch this bird. Run around to the gate before them braunks get out and set us afoot."

Cory and the two old punchers ran around to the south side of the pen. Sam was keeping as far from the prisoner as he could. He was afraid of that outlaw, even if his feet were hobbled and Titus was standing over him with a gun.

"Roll under the wagon," Titus said to the prisoner. Then as the man rolled under, he deftly jerked the thong from his feet, and whispered: "I don't want to see you hang. It makes me sick to the stummick. You know where yo' horse is. Roll out on the other side of the wagon, and keep moving."

The prisoner didn't question the motive that turned him loose. He rolled and kept rolling until he was well away from the camp. Then he rose, bent low, and ran for the draw in which he had left his horse. Titus had known that there was no danger of the horses getting out. He knew why they were running about the pen snorting. A breeze had sprung up from the south, and they smelled fresh blood.

WHEN Cory and the others came back, Titus was standing by the campfire, watching Sam cook breakfast.

"What did you do with that bird?" asked Cory.

"Put him back under the wagon. He's got a headache, and we can talk to him some more when he's had some coffee."

Old Dave strolled over to the wagon a few minutes later. It was quite light now, and he saw that the prisoner was gone.

"Hey, fellers!" he called. "That maverick has slipped his hobbles and took to the roughs."

They all came running to look for a trace of the fugitive, but none could be found.

"Oh, well," said Cory, at last. "It saves

us the unpleasant trouble of hangin' him."

"Let's eat breakfast.'

It was after breakfast that Titus said:

"Well, fellers, we'd as well move camp. Old man Gurney sent us out here to hide the horses. They found 'em. They'll be safer in the trap now, and we'll have a little more help if they jump us again."

The others agreed with him. The team was hitched up, and the two dead outlaws put into the wagon. Sam mounted to his seat and lined out for the Diamond G, showing much white in his eyes, as he looked back from time to time at the two bodies. The horses were turned out and trailed on after the chuck-wagon. Dave and Spence followed the horses, while Cory and Titus brought up the rear.

"Cory," said Titus, in an apologetic tone, "I'm afraid I'm goin' to have to apologize to Vard Selman when I see him again."

"Why?"

"For turnin' that killer loose, so he could go and tell Lem Crosby the news."

"Why, Titus," grinned Cory, "you ain't got as much character as a four-term convict. Turnin' that criminal loose to prey on sassiety. He'll—"

"He'll pack a load of tribulation and grief for Vard Selman across Red River, and pass it on to Lem Crosby."

"That would be good strategy, if you was workin' with humans, but you ain't. Still and all, we're in a bad enough hole right now to try anything, once."

The horses were thrown into the trap. The wagon trundled on to the barn, and the four riders stopped at the pens. Two horses stood at the yard gates. One of them was Gurney's, the other Vard Selman's.

Another wagon was standing with team attached and some tools and several farmhands in it. Gurney left Selman standing at the gate, and walked out to where the men waited. Cory and Titus were watching every move. They saw Freda Gurney leave the house and walk out to where Selman was as soon as old Ben left him.

"There goes the news," growled Cory.

"Well, hang it, Cory, I can't help it," said Titus peevishly.

"Shore you can't, but you can help battin' yo' eyes until you know Vard Selman's dead, and you better do it."

"What made you bring the horses in?" asked Gurney.

"Why," replied Titus, "we taken 'em out there to hide 'em, and the Crosby gang found our hiding place. They jumped us just before daylight, and—"

"And what?"

"We got three of 'em. One got away. The other two are in the wagon."

"All right. Vard and me have been down in the bottom. We found two dead down there. We're just startin' to bury 'em, and we'll take your two and bury 'em all at once."

THE wagon moved off with the dead. Vard Selman mounted and led the way with Ben Gurney, as coolly as if he were Gurney's partner. He looked Cory and Titus over impersonally, as they sat their horses, waiting for him and Gurney to mount, but gave no hint that he had ever seen them before in his life. Freda stood at the gate, watching them, and Titus cursed under his breath at thought of what she knew, and what she had probably told Vard Selman in the few minutes she had been alone with him.

"Cory," said Titus, as they rode on toward the river. "Vard Selman ain't human. Any other man on earth, in his place, would be nervous. He's as cold as a wooden Indian, and he knows right now that if he makes a break, he'll be shot to shoe strings."

"Yes," growled Cory, "and if he ever breaks loose, he'll kill, just like a man-eatin' tiger. Them slim hands of his'n are gun hands, and I'll bet he's got more than that one pistol on him. If that girl told him what we know, and she'd be just fool enough to do it, he's going to watch for us to turn our backs and then get us, company or no company."

They reached the bottom and opened a big grave in the soft, sandy ground. Cory and Titus looked at the two men Vard and Gurney had found. They were two of the group that had protested against jumping the Crosby gang, in the saloon the night before. Crosby had lost no men in that fight. But when the escaped prisoner told his tale, the outlaw chief would know he had lost two men at the Hackberry pens. And he would charge that loss to Selman.

The bodies were wrapped in blankets and laid in the grave. As the farmhands filled the grave, Selman called Gurney aside and they stood talking in low tones.

"Look out," said Titus. "It's apt to happen now."

The only thing that happened was that Selman seemed to be insisting upon something, while Gurney protested. Presently Selman shrugged his shoulders, turned away, mounted his horse, and took the river trail toward Dally, while old Ben stood watching him, with an odd expression in his keen blue eyes.

The grave was filled and the wagon trundled away to the ranch. Dave and Spence mounted and followed it. Cory, Titus, and Ben Gurney stood by their horses.

"I reck'n I ought to fire you two fellows," said Gurney. "Vard says you belong to Crosby's gang. When he was talking to me, he proposed that we kill you and bury you with the others, I told him no—I'd just keep you and watch you until I was sure of it."

"Thank you," grinned Titus, "but I'm afraid you overlooked a bet. That was the best chance you'll ever have to get Vard Selman."

"We didn't have anything to get him for."

"We'd've had something to get him for, if you'd've stepped away from him a few feet and let him draw on us."

"You might," drawled old Ben Gurney, "but I think right smart of my family, and I believe they'd miss me. Selman is a gunner. I think he would have got both of you, and then got me for throwing the deal."

IV

IT was afternoon and the *siesta* hour at the Diamond G. It was a sleepy old place any time. On that hot, still September day, the Diamond G was dead. No one had slept much the night before, and everyone was asleep, who could sleep. That meant only two persons were awake.

Cory and the other men were sprawled on bunks in the bunkhouse, dead to the world, hot as it was. But Titus lay on a worn cot, out under a spreading oak tree. He was not asleep. There was much on his mind.

Vard Selman had coolly suggested that he and Cory be killed and buried along with the other outlaws. That meant that the first good chance Vard had, he would do some killing on his own account.

Titus stirred uneasily. How much, he wondered, had that fool red-headed girl told Vard? How much did he know? How could any man on earth be cold enough and game enough to go to that burying with the Diamond G outfit, when he knew they were wise to him? But did he know it? Vard knew, of course, that Cory and Titus were the men who had done the shooting in the Five Tribes the night before, though he had not known at that time that the two saddle-drifters were working for the Diamond G. That was enough reason for Vard to want them killed.

Titus brushed a fly from his face. How big a fool, he wondered, was the red-headed daughter of Ben Gurney? But at that moment his thoughts broke off with a jerk, and he sat up on the side of the old cot. Something had fallen on him and bounced off onto the ground.

He saw it was nothing but a paper ball, but such balls didn't grow on oak trees. Someone had thrown it. He looked up into the tree, then all around. The bunkhouse door was open, but no one could have thrown it from there. Anyway, it would have been a boot or a bootjack—not a paper ball.

The bunkshack and the ranchhouse were in the same enclosure, with a stretch of thick shrubbery and trees between them. Titus was looking hard at that wall of shrubbery, the leaves of which stood motionless in the dead air, when he saw a red spot appear among the foliage, and a moment later a white hand beckoned to him.

TITUS sprang up and, walking carefully, so his spurs wouldn't clink, entered the shrubbery. Freda Gurney was standing by a bench, under an old pear tree. She motioned toward the seat.

"Sit down," she said curtly, in a low tone. "You're the one they call Titus?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm Freda Gurney. Can you tell the truth?"

"Yes'm, in a pinch—if I ain't pinched too hard."

"Did you tell it last night, when you told dad that story about Vard Selman?"

"Yes, ma'am. Did you tell Vard Selman what I said?"

Titus shot the question, thinking he would trip her, but he missed his guess.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" she snapped.

"I don't know yet. I ain't very well acquainted with you."

"That wouldn't do you any good. You'd expect my daddy to be pretty well acquainted with me, and he thinks I'm a fool. I'm talking to you, because I've got to talk to somebody, and my mammy and daddy treat me like I was nine days old and didn't have my eyes open yet. It makes me mad."

"That's too bad," drawled Titus.

"Don't try to get smart with me," snapped Freda. "I won't stand for it. I got acquainted with Vard Selman and I liked him. He's the nicest man I ever knew. He liked me and asked me to marry him. I told him I would. Then dad flew off the nest, and said 'don't.' I told mother, and she said, "If daddy says 'don't, don't!' Now what do you say?"

"Don't," grinned Titus.

"I think if I was a man I'd kill you for that," said Freda. But there was a smile in her blue eyes. "I'll pass it, though, if you can tell me why."

"Because he's a thief, a liar, and a murderer—besides whatever else is the matter with him."

"That's what you say," said Freda, her lip curling. "I heard you say that about him last night. I don't know you, and I do know Vard Selman. Why should I take your word in preference to his?"

"That's a sorty hard question," said Titus. "I may be prejudiced against Mr. Selman. He tried to get Mr. Gurney to kill me this morning."

"How do you know that?"

"Mr. Gurney told me, and Ben Gurney don't lie."

"No, that's one thing my daddy won't do," said Freda. "But— do you think it's right for daddy to treat me like a child?"

"Well, now, I don't know about that. Knowin' what he knows about Vard Selman, if he told you to throw him, and you didn't do it, he ain't treatin' you enough like a child."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, he ought to turn you across his lap and use a shingle on you."

"THAT'S a smart thing for a man to say," snapped Freda, springing from the seat and turning away toward the house.

"Just a minute, Miss Freda," said Titus. "Sit down and let's talk this over. You asked me to tell you the truth, and I told it. If you knew all them things, and still wanted to marry Vard, a spankin' would be too good for you."

Freda turned and looked at him, then she laughed.

"You don't know much about talking to girls, do you?"

"No, ma'am, I don't know much about anything, but it looks to me like I found something new."

"What's that?" asked Freda, sliding into the seat by his side.

"A woman with some brains. Ain't hardly anybody in the world got sense enough to ask 'why.' You like yo' old daddy right well, don't you?"

"Of course, I do. He's the greatest daddy in the world, but—"

"They ain't no but about it. We'll just cut down the territory a little. Just say he's the greatest daddy you ever had, and you love him some and would like to do something to keep him from worryin' and maybe gettin' killed all to pieces."

"Certainly, I'll say that."

"All right. Yo' daddy has been worryin' himself about sick over you and this Vard Selman, and all—"

"How do you know he has?"

"I know right smart for a cowpuncher. Yo' daddy has done plenty for you, and it's up to you to do something for him."

"What can I do?"

"Well, I'd say about like this. Sneak into the house and watch him. He'll wake up pretty soon. When he does and sits up on the side of the bed to stretch and rub his eyes, you just put yo' arm around his neck, and say, says you, 'Daddy, I've took that ring off'n my finger, and I'm goin' to throw him cold, less'n he can prove that Titus lied about him.'"

"Put my arm around his neck," said Freda, with a twinkle in her blue eyes. "What would you do, if I should put my arm around your neck?"

"I reck'n I'd faint first, then tell yo' folks you had gone crazy. But it won't hurt yo' daddy that way."

"Titus, I'm beginning to think that what I need is a side-partner that's sound instead of a fellow that's so pretty and smart. I'll shake hands with you on that, and go right straight and do it. You are the first one that ever talked to me like you thought I had good sense."

Freda gripped Titus' brown hand and slipped away through the shrubbery. Titus listened until her footsteps died out, then drew a long breath.

"Well, I'll be hog-tied. Who ever heard of as pretty a thing as that having any sense?"

He stole back to the old cot and lay down again. He was less sleepy now than ever, but there was a load off his mind. Vard Selman didn't know what he had told Ben Gurney, and Freda would never tell him now. That left a pretty good chance for Selman to fall into the trap Titus had set for him.

WHETHER Freda followed instructions or not, was not known to Titus, but an hour later when Ben appeared at the bunkshack, there seemed to be new life in his old body, and Titus thought he knew the reason.

"Now, fellows," said Gurney, "we want to decide what to do. We know that five of us can't carry on a war with all the outlaws in the country. If Vard Selman is what you say he is, he can whistle and get all the men he wants. He won't have to even whistle. If he's the head of the Whiskey Trail organization, he can tell all the thugs on this border where to head in. He can even make Crosby eat out of his hand."

"I've been thinking about that some," said Titus. "But if that chap that got away from us this morning packs what I told him to Crosby, it won't be easy for Vard to patch it up. And Vard's goin' to need help, *pronto.*"

"Help to do what?" asked Gurney.

"Help to keep us from taking him apart. We can't quit now."

"Quit?" said Gurney. "Don't look to me like we've ever began anything."

"Well, we killed one of your horses at the river yesterday," grinned Titus, "and crippled some of Crosby's men. Then this morning us boys ruined two good horse thieves and scared another one half out of his wits. Yes, we started something and we better finish the job."

"How's our little squad goin' to finish anything with the Crosby gang?" Gurney wanted to know.

"We'll have to find that out when we get to it. Crosby's gang won't be hunting horses tonight. They're more apt to be trying to settle things with Vard Selman. Do you know the country on the other side of the river along here, Mr. Gurney?"

"As well as I know my own range."

"Where does this Crosby outfit hang out?"

"Hang out? Why, Lem Crosby lives on his ranch and big farm. He married an Indian woman and was adopted into the tribe."

"He wouldn't have a gang of thieves and killers at his home, would he?"

"No. He's got another place about two miles from the river and half a mile below the trail that you and Cory came in on. It's the Old Dickerson place. A tumble-down old double-log house in a thick bottom. You might have noticed a deep worn cross-trail about two miles the other side of the river. The end of that trail to the east goes to the Dickerson place. Crosby calls it his horse ranch, and I reck'n it is. They break some horses there, but they handle more that comes from this side of the river and are already broke. There's four-five thousand acres of thick, brushy bottom around the place, and if a horse, or a man either, was hid in there, the devil couldn't find him with a lantern in the daytime."

"Sounds like a nice place," said Titus. "Now, as I said, they ain't apt to be anybody wanting horses tonight. You and Dave and Spence can pen 'em, and sorty watch 'em here at the ranch. The way it all turned out last night, Cory and me didn't get hardly no tradin' done, so—"

"All right," interrupted Gurney. "You boys go on to town, if you want to, but you better keep yo' eyes open. Vard is apt to have some fellow slip a few bullets into you."

An hour later Titus and Cory mounted and rode away from the Diamond G. As soon as they were out of sight of the house,

on the trail toward Dally, Titus turned to the right, and led the way half a mile toward the river. He stopped in an opening in the heart of the big thicket and rolled a smoke.

"Titus," said Cory. "Didn't nobody hit you on the head in their ruckuses last night, did they?"

"Nope. I just went crazy a purpose. I couldn't tell the old man I was scared to meet Vard Selman. He might come there to the house. If he does, he's goin' to be sorty cross when he leaves. So we just went to town and then didn't go, because we might meet Vard too sudden in Dally. I ain't in no hurry to kill him."

"I ain't, neither," drawled Cory. "It would take me two full seconds. Is Ben going to send our meals to us here?"

"No. Soon as it gets dark enough for bats to begin to fly, we're goin' to head back into them Five Civilized Tribes."

"Now, I know you're crazy."

"No, I ain't. Get a earful of this." Titus went on talking, while Cory openly cursed him for an addle-pated, crack-brained fool.

IT was growing dark when Cory and Titus splashed across the shallow ford on Red River, where they had crossed into Texas only the day before. They passed on through the screen of cottonwoods on the north side, and turning out, stopped in a thicket of willows.

"Now, Cory," said Titus. "If we put this over, we win a big bet."

"Yes," growled Cory, "and if we don't put it over, we win a coupla tarnished crowns and a stringless harp or two. I'd shore hate to be buried among these civilized people."

"We ain't in no danger. You talk like an old woman."

"I wish I was one, sittin' in a rockin' chair, knittin'. You and me take turns about leadin' the deals we gets into, and it's yo' turn to lead this one."

"Oh, shut up and come on. Watch for that cross trail."

Titus pushed out into the main trail and turned north. It was pitch dark now, and not a sound to be heard, except the clop-clop of their horses' hoofs on the sandy trail. By a stroke of luck Titus found the cross-trail and turned to the right.

Titus was thinking that that narrow gash in the bosque would be a poor place to meet anyone, when he suddenly turned to the right and passed between two big trees whose tops he could see faintly against the sky. About fifty feet from the trail he stopped, and Cory's horse nosed up by the side of him.

"We have arrive, Cory," Titus whispered. "We are more or less in the land of the enemy, but we're safe. Get down. Tie yo' braunk to something he can't pull up, then buckle a strap around his nose so he can't nicker. Noise might make our heads ache."

A few minutes later, sans spurs and chaps, with their guns pulled well to the front, the partners stole out into the trail and went on east, on foot.

Two hundred yards farther on they came out in a little clearing. Titus squatted to the ground and got the outline of a sprawling one-story house against the murky sky. He studied it a moment. It was a familiar type of Oklahoma or Texas shack. Two big rooms, with an open entry between them. A long front gallery on the south side and shed rooms on the north. There was a faint ray of light from a small dirty window in the east room.

Titus rose, pulled at Cory's arm and stole cautiously on toward the west end of the house. When they gained the west wall of the house, they stopped to listen a moment, then crept on around the back side of the old ruin. For a robbers' roost it was strangely silent. At the east end of the house they stopped in a chimney corner.

The mortar had been knocked from a small crack in the logs by the side of the chimney and they could peer through. There was no lamp or candle in the room. That dim light was from a little fire in the dirty fireplace. Sitting in a rickety chair in front of the fireplace, was a lone man. He was a dwarfish ape-like runt, with a big head, which shot forward from his shoulders, and his face was seamed and scarred like that of a gargoyle. He was leaning back in his chair, with his arms hanging down by the sides, and his knotty fists almost touched the floor.

Such was the picture of Lem Crosby that the partners saw. The man was a monstrosity. He didn't fit in with the general conception of a stalwart outlaw

chief. Lem Crosby looked so much like a beast that Titus wondered if he could talk, and whether he would be able to understand him if he did talk.

Suddenly Crosby leaned over, caught up some pieces of dry wood and threw them on the fire. The wood caught and blazed up brightly. Then Crosby rose from his chair, his nostrils working like a hound on scent. He was not more than five foot four, heavy of build, and terribly bow-legged. He turned facing the door that entered from the open hall, and stood listening for a moment, then dropped his hand to his gun.

THERE was the sound of a light step and clinking spurs out on the long gallery. Crosby seemed to quiver, as he stood with his eyes on the open door. Then Vard Selman stepped through it.

"Hello, Lem," greeted Selman. "All by yourself?"

"Yes," growled Crosby. "How many have you got with you?"

"Not a soul. You don't think I'm afraid to come over here alone? I've been here before."

"Huh. You've not been here very often, and things now ain't like they have been, on either side of this Red River. Sit down, and rest yourself."

Crosby reseated himself in the rickety chair. The handsome Vard Selman drew off his gauntlet gloves, threw them on a dirty bunk, then after a moment sat down on the edge of the bunk, as there was no other chair.

"Now, see here, Lem," said Selman. "There's no use for us to fall out about that little mess. You lost two men, and got some crippled. I lost two, and got some crippled. You could expect a thing like that to happen. This is a dangerous game that we're playing."

"Yes," snarled Crosby. "It's damned dangerous, when part of our outfit takes sides with the ranchers on the other side of the river, and helps kill us out. How many of your men were in them Hackberry pens this morning, with the Diamond G outfit?"

"Not a one of them."

"There was sombeody there besides Ben Gurney and his cripples."

Selman nodded. "Ben Gurney has taken on a couple of lead-slinging drifters, and we've got to get rid of them."

"Huh. Lead-slingers are all alike to me. I'd just as soon Ben Gurney's killers got me, as yours. Things ain't right, when men can't go across the river and lead home a few gentle ponies."

"Don't get tiresome, Lem," said Selman, in an irritated tone. "I didn't come over here to apologize to you for anything I've done. I came to tell you that there are some things that you must not do. I've been boss of this business for two years, and I've come clean with all you fellows, when you treated me right. Keep on treating me right, and I'll continue to come clean with you. Go against me, and I'll—Well, you'd better not do it."

"Must is a right big word, when it's used to men that are in the habit of doing as they please," sneered Crosby. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"You know what I mean, I gave orders a year ago that everybody must lay off the Diamond G. Nobody bothered Gurney's stock, until I went away. When I got back, I found that somebody had been leading Diamond G horses across the river. I called Burl about it, and he said it was you, and that you were going to make a drag last night. Some of your boys went across last night, and I stopped them. I'll stop them any time they do it."

"Why?" asked Crosby, with a cunning light in his eyes.

"That's my business,." snapped Selman.

"Yes," snarled Crosby, baring his yellow teeth like an enraged beast, "and I'm going to make it my business. I'll tell you why. It's because you ain't got sense enough to know that a man can't be a thief and a gentleman at the same time. You think you are going to marry Ben Gurney's red-headed gal, and—"

"We won't discuss that," said Vard, coolly.

"Oh, yes we will discuss it. You keep still until I get you told. You may marry her. You are slick enough to fool the devil—for a while. But when old Ben Gurney finds out just what you are, and I'll be hanged if I can see why he hasn't found it out before now, he'll pour hot lead in yore ear while you're asleep—if he can't get you any other way. If you want to turn decent and be an honest

gentleman, your old friends will keep mum, and wish you luck. The point is, you can't be both. Trouble with you is that you think you are a king, when you ain't nothing but a pore fool."

VARD SELMAN sprang to his feet, livid with rage, and his hand went to his gun. Crosby looked up at him without the change of a muscle in his face.

"I know you're faster with a gun than I am," he said. "You can kill me, maybe. But if you do—"

"Why, you poor, hunch-backed, crippled idiot," sneered Selman. "I'd as soon hit a month-old baby as to strike you." Selman's dark, swarthy face was livid now, and his white teeth were bared in a murderous grin. "I'm not going to kill you. I need you, to do dirty things that a respectable thief wouldn't touch. I need you right now, to make your band of thugs lay off the Diamond G, and you are going to do it. You're not a fool. You know all I have to do is whistle, and enough of my men would come down the Whiskey Trail, from Arbuckle Mountains to eat your little outfit. You know I am not afraid of you, or I wouldn't be telling you this, when I have only ten men in reach, and you have twenty. You have my orders about the Diamond G, and you're going to obey them, or—"

"Or what?" grated Crosby.

"Or I'll hang you, and every one of your men, right here to your own trees."

Lem Crosby broke into a horrible, raucous laugh.

"What are you laughing at?" snapped Selman.

"I just happened to think that I never seen a dead man officiate at a hanging. You can get men, by calling for 'em. I've already got men. If just one more of my men is killed on yon side the river, something is going to happen to you."

Crosby broke off, chuckling evilly.

"Lem," said Selman, evenly, "I said you wasn't a fool, but I believe I was mistaken. You know that the only reason I don't kill you, right now, is that I haven't the time to clean up the rest of your lousy gang, and—"

"And you can't afford to let Ben Gurney and his red-headed gal know that you've been standing in with a lot of outlaws," snarled Crosby. "Tell the truth about it, even if you are a damned, double-crossin' thief and liar, trying to be a gentleman. I tell you, if just one more of my men—one more—gets bumped off—"

"Stop right there," thundered Selman, as the hammer of his gun clicked in its holster. "You told me that once, and that was once too often. Don't think you could get away with it if you and your trained murderers killed me. I wasn't fool enough to come into a nest like this, without anybody knowing I was coming. If I'm not back in Dally, safe and sound, by midnight, the Whiskey Trail outfit will get you—and you know it!"

WATCHING the duel of words between the two outlaws, through the crack in the old log house, Cory and Titus could hear the very wheels in Crosby's head click into reverse, as he changed tactics.

"Aw, hell, Vard," he whined. "Ain't no use for you and me to quar'l, like two old women. Of course you know I don't aim to get in bad with the Whiskey Trail outfit. Take yo' hand off'n yo' gun, sit down, and let's talk this thing over, quiet."

"No," snapped Selman. "I've made all the talk I'm going to make, and that talk goes. I have other business to attend to tonight."

"Well, let me get the bottle, and we'll take a little drink or two on"

"You know I don't touch liquor."

"I know you ain't no drinkin' man," whined Crosby, "but one little drink, just to show they ain't no hard feelings between us, won't hurt anything."

"No. Not even one drop. Obey my orders about the Diamond G, and we'll get along all right."

Vard Selman picked up his gloves, turned his back on one of the coldest killers in that wild country, and walked from the room.

When the sound of Selman's galloping horse died out to the west, Lem Crosby straightened in his chair. The red light of the fire was on his gargoyle face, and cold murder was in his glaring, bloodshot blue-gray eyes. Vard Selman had gone out of that room alive, by sheer nerve. But death would be following him from that moment on.

Crosby clenched his huge hands, and unclenched them, as if they were at Selman's throat. He loosened his gun in its holster, and clicked the hammer.

Suddenly, he gave a shrill whistle through his broken front teeth, and then sat listening.

V

AT Crosby's whistle, men came clumping across the open clearing, and a dozen of them entered the room at the door through which Vard Selman had just passed. A black-browed giant among them, who seemed to be a sort of lieutenant to Crosby, ripped out an oath.

"Why didn't you give the word, and let us kill that skunk, Lem?"

"Keep your shirt on, Bogle," said Crosby, quietly. "You're always trying to go off half-cocked. Looks like you never will learn to use your head. We don't want to get in bad with the Whiskey Trail outfit."

"No, we don't want to," growled Bogle, "but we will, whenever we kill Vard Selman. And he's got to be kilt. He has set in to put us out of business."

"Yes," said Crosby, "I know we've got to kill him, but I don't want him killed here. This is just a horse ranch, and I want it to stay a horse ranch. If Vard Selman was killed here, the Whiskey Trail outfit would take this place apart. If he gets killed in a gunfight, on the other side of the river, we are in the clear, no matter who kills him—nor what for."

"That's all true," said Bogle, "but while we are waiting for that to happen, who gets the Diamond G horses?"

"We do. We're going to get 'em tonight. They were moved back from Hackberry pens to the Diamond G trap, today, and—"

"Well, let's go get 'em," snapped Bogle. "We can't lead no horses nowhere by sitting here."

"There you go again," growled Crosby. "Don't try to work too fast. Henley, you and Stewart get your horses and go on across the river. Scout that horse-trap, and make sure that the horses are in it, then come on back and meet us at the river. You go to my house, Bogle, and get the boys that are there, and bring them on to the trail crossing. I'll be there with the other boys."

Before Crosby finished speaking, Titus was pulling at Cory's arm. They passed swiftly around the house, and on to where they had left their horses. Without waiting to put on chaps and spurs, they mounted and rode west. Striking the main trail, they turned south, and made all speed for the river.

They might run, they realized, into Vard Selman. They didn't know what was ahead of them. But they knew what was behind them, and that it was coming along that trail pretty soon. Neither of them spoke until they had splashed through the ford and were on the south bank of Red River.

"TITUS," said Cory, as he kicked into his chaps and put on his spurs, "I've followed you into that Civilized country the last time. I ain't been skeered as bad since that woman asked me to hold her baby. We overlooked the only good bet we're likely to have, when we didn't poke our guns through that crack and kill them two dirty hyenas."

"Yes," interrupted Titus, "and get killed by the rest of the gang. I don't want to be buried in that Civilized coun ry no more than you do."

"Huh. Them heathens wouldn't bury nobody," growled Cory. "It makes me right cold, every time I think of that spidery-looking devil, Lem Crosby. He ain't even part human."

"What about Vard Selman? Ain't he sorty chilly?"

"Yes, but he *looks* like a human, and Crosby don't. Let's mount and ride from here, before my feet freeze."

"No. We haven't finished our little job yet," said Titus. "Crosby said if he lost just one more man in this mess, he was going to take Vard apart. If Mr. Henley and Mr. Stewart come along here on their way to inspect that horse-trap, I aim for him to lose at least one."

"We can stop them at the trap, just as well as we can here, and—Uh-oh. It's too late now. Listen!"

They heard a horse snort, then the splash of water, as two riders entered the ford from the other side of the river.

"Here's as good a place as any," said

Titus. "We'll get 'em at the foot of the cut. Be careful, and don't overshoot."

"Why, Titus, you cold-blooded little hellion. We can't open on 'em that away. It might be just some pore pilgrims like you and me, makin' a honest but hurried effort to get out of that Civilized country alive."

"All right, I'll hail 'em," snapped Titus. "Get set. Here they come."

The two men rode out of the water, and were at the foot of the cut when Titus called:

"Hey, Henley! Is that you and Stewart?"

The horsemen stopped, and one of them snarled back:

"Yes, it's us. What the hell's it to you?"

"Vard said you Crosby rustlers were to let the Diamond G stuff alone, and—"

Titus was interrupted by the crash of a gun, a spurt of orange flame, and a bullet that whined up through the cut.

Old Cory was satisfied, now that the amenities had been complied with. His gun was smoking before the light of that shot died out. Many Red River guns would roar before morning—for Lem Crosby, waiting at the cross trails, heard those shots, and guessed what they meant.

Henley went from his saddle at the first volley. Stewart managed to turn his horse and drive in the spurs. He was hit, but made his way to the other side. And the partners could hear the thud of hoofs on the sand bar.

"Now, I know we ain't got no more business here," said Titus, as he whirled his horse and headed for the Diamond G at a gallop, with Old Cory close at his heels.

SOME things had happened at the Diamond G that night that were not on the cards as Titus had viewed them. In fact, they were happening while Cory and Titus sat waiting for Henley and Stewart to come and get killed.

Freda Gurney had been expecting Vard to call all evening. The blunt lecture that Titus had given her, had put her mind to working. She was a forthright young person, who never went half way at anything. She had no more conception of such a man as Vard Selman, and what he could do, than a child would have had.

That a relentless devil could be hidden under that polished surface had never occurred to her until she had heard Titus tell his story in the bunkhouse that night. That had set her thinking, and when Titus, who was the kind of people she could really understand, told her bluntly that Vard was a thief, liar, and killer, she made up her mind promptly. She had gone directly to old Ben Gurney and told him that she was going to give Vard's ring back to him, and tell him not to come to see her again until he could prove that the charges against him were not true.

Even straightforward Old Ben Gurney had no conception of what that was going to do to a man like Vard Selman. Freda insisted that Vard would come, and she also insisted that her father sit in the shadows on the long front gallery, and hear what she said to Vard, for she was going to meet him at the head of the steps, give him his ring, and not invite him into the house.

Hot from his interview with Lem Crosby, with a thousand devils of rage still tearing at his vitals, Vard Selman rode to the Diamond G. Ben Gurney was yawning in his chair, at one end of the gallery. The hall door was open, and a wide bar of light fell across the gallery, and on down the steps. As Selman approached those steps, Freda was standing at the head of them, in that bar of light. The excitement made her look more beautiful than ever.

"Freda!" cried Vard, half under his breath. "You are the prettiest thing I ever saw in my life. You—you look like an angel, standing in that light."

"I'm not one," said Freda, tersely, stepping back from him as he reached for her hand. "Here's something for you."

Vard held out his hand and she dropped the ring into it.

"Why—what—what's this?" he stammered.

"It is your ring," replied Freda, coldly. "You are charged with being the head of the Whiskey Trail gang, and with being a thief, a liar and a killer. We are not engaged any more, until you can prove those things untrue."

"Who says such things about me?" demanded Vard, his voice low.

"What difference does it make who says them?"

"It makes a difference to me. Tell me who it was, and I'll kill him."

"I'll never tell you," said Freda, firmly.

"Yes you will tell me, or by—"

Selman had caught the girl's round, white arm in a grip that almost made her scream with pain. As he started his threat, the big voice of Old Ben Gurney roared:

"Stop! Take your hand off—"

Gurney didn't finish his sentence, either. Selman's gun flashed from the holster. A shot crashed. Gurney went down. Vard Selman turned, walked swiftly to the gate, mounted his horse and galloped away toward Dally.

DAVE and Spence came running from the bunkhouse. Old Dave saw at a glance what had happened. Selman had intended that bullet to go square through Ben Gurney's head, but he had fired just a mite too high. It had merely cut a swath through the iron-gray hair, and burned a blue mark across Gurney's scalp. They carried him in and laid him on the bed. Then, as they bathed his head with cold water, he roused and sat up on the side of the bed, looking about him owlishly.

"What—what happened?" he asked.

"Vard creased you a little," said Dave. "You better lie down."

"Where did Vard go?" insisted Gurney.

"Back to Dally, I reck'n."

"But, Dave. Cory and Titus went to Dally. They may meet Vard, and they won't know he is on the kill."

"They're apt to find it out if they meet him," said Old Dave, bluntly, "and he's apt to be damn' sorry when they find it out."

"Yes, but Vard's apt to pot both of 'em, before they know he's on the prod."

"No he won't. Them two drifters are awake, *all the time*. Lie down and keep still, before—"

It wasn't any trouble for Ben Gurney to lie down, and he kept very still—for he had gone clean out again.

Freda, who had heard it all, thought her father was all right, and was just obeying Dave's orders. There was something else in her mind just then. She had told Titus that she thought what she needed was a side-partner, who had some sense. Titus had tried to be that, and now he was in danger. A partnership worked two ways from the ace, and she had to do her part.

Freda slipped from the room, where old Ben lay on the bed. Mrs. Gurney and Dave were bending over Ben, too busy with what they saw before them to notice the girl, whom they thought of no account in such an emergency as this. As she saddled her horse, meaning to take the Dally trail, Freda heard the drum of distant firing. It came from the direction of the river. That must be Cory and Titus, she thought, already in trouble. She flashed to her saddle and headed down the river trail.

It happened that as Cory and Titus made all haste for the Diamond G, after their brush with Henley and Stewart, they ran square into Freda. When she knew who they were, she blurted her story, and they all three tore on toward the ranch. When they got there, Ben Gurney had revived again, and seemed all right, except that he could not sit up.

"They're planning another raid on the Diamond G horses tonight," said Titus. "You and Spence stay here at the house, Dave. Cory and me will ride the trap, and keep watch."

Cory and Titus started back to their horses. Freda went to the head of the steps with them. There was still a light in the hall, and Freda still looked like an angel, as she stood at the head of the steps, but she was not one. She was very much a human woman, just then. Titus had stopped and was looking at her, and she was speaking to him.

"Titus, I—I got you all into this trouble, and now—"

"We ain't in no trouble hardly, now" said Titus.

"No, but you and Cory are going to be. Isn't—isn't there something that I can do?"

"Shore is, Miss Freda. You can go into the house, shut the door and stop up the keyhole. I can't think of anything that would help me more than to know that you ain't out in these wild bottoms tonight. Looks like it might be sorty rough."

Then Titus was gone.

Freda stood listening until they mounted and headed straight for Dally, as she knew they were going to do.

"Damn Vard Selman," snapped Titus, when they were out on the trail. "I ain't had much to kill him for, until now, but

I'm rearin' to mix smoke with him now. He can't get away with stuff like that."

"Why, Titus, I ain't never saw you go crazy, and plumb lose your head like this before. We can't whip Vard Selman's gang."

"We can whip a few of the worst ones," snarled Titus. "All I want is just one clean shot at Vard Selman. When I think of him putting his blood-soaked fist on a innocent woman, it riles me to hell and back. Did you see them blue spots on Freda's arm? Come on, before I blow plumb up and bust."

The two pounded on down the trail.

BACK at the Cross-Trails Lem Crosby and his gang were quietly waiting for Bogle and the rest of his men, when Stewart galloped into them, reeling in his saddle as he rode.

"Here," called Crosby, "what's wrong? What was all them shots about?"

"They got Henley cold, and they cut me deep in the hip."

"Who got Henley?" demanded Crosby.

"Some of that Whiskey Trail outfit," said Stewart, and he told what had happened, confident that it was Selman's men who had hailed them at the foot of the cut.

"All right," snapped Crosby. "They'll pay the damages. Go on to my house and tell Sarena to doctor you. If you meet Bogle, tell him to get on here with the other men."

Stewart rode on toward Crosby's home. A few minutes later, Bogle arrived with the other men.

"Now, boys," said Crosby, "I told Vard Selman that if I lost just one more man in this mess, I was going to take his outfit apart. They got Henley, and they got him on yon side the river. I reck'n Vard is having the river guarded, to see that we let the Diamond G horses alone. All right, we'll let 'em alone—for a while. I'm going to Dally, to get Vard Selman. Any of you that want to drop out of a rough mess, can—"

Crosby broke off and headed for the river. He knew no one was going to drop out. To drop out then, meant to drop out of the Crosby gang. They would be safer in the gang than out of it, now. War had been declared on the Whiskey Trail gang, and it might not end for some time.

CORY and Titus were within a hundred yards of where the river trail came into the main trail to Dally, when Titus pulled up.

"Listen, Cory!"

They could hear the rumble of hoofs, as a considerable party of horsemen swept by and went on toward Dally.

"Huh," grunted Cory. "Mr. Crosby must have found his one man. Now, I reck'n he's going to Dally, to ask Selman how come."

"Yes," snapped Titus, "and I wanted to beat him to it. Come on."

"Wait a minute, Titus. Don't crowd them Crosby boys. They're Civilized folks, and they might think it was impolite. If we get there in time for the second table, there'll be plenty left."

After waiting a few minutes for the Crosby gang to get out of the way, Cory and Titus followed on toward Dally.

A heavy silence was over the old cow-town, as Cory and Titus rode into the east end of the main street, and stopped. It was almost midnight, and most of the town was asleep. A single rooster crowed, sleepily, and silence fell again. The only light to be seen in the long street came from the front of the Five Tribes saloon, and the windows of the dancehall above it.

"Come on," said Titus, impatiently. "We can't see anything from here. Let's get a front seat."

"Wait a minute, Titus. You're crazy, but you're a good partner, and I'd hate to lose you. We know the Crosby Gang is in there, somewhere, because we seen 'em go in, and didn't see 'em come out. We know Vard Selman and his Whiskey Trailers are in there, because they roost there every night. When them two outfits meet, cross as Selman and Crosby are right now, they's going to be a right smart mess. If we start riding toward that Five Tribes place, we're apt to meet a flock of bullets coming this way. Let's just leave our braunks here, where we can pick 'em up as we pass out, then sneak up on foot and look the layout over. If we don't like it, we don't have to buy it."

Discarding chaps and spurs, the partners went forward, slipping from shadow to shadow, until they were in the grove of trees by the side of the Five Tribes. This was the second time they had hid in that

grove. The first time, they had come out of it all right, but this didn't look so good. If they had been sure that the two gangs of outlaws would shoot it out, they would have been satisfied to let it go at that. At least, Cory would have been. Nothing short of seeing Vard Selman dead would ever satisfy Titus. He could still see those blue spots on Freda's arm, even when his eyes were closed.

Safely in the grove, they could see nothing. Nor could they hear anything, save the whining of a fiddle in the dance hall, and the shuff-shuff of dancing feet. They stood tensely listening, expecting to hear horses moving, as Crosby's men hid among the trees. Suddenly they heard a movement on the other side of the street, and knew exactly what it was. It was the cheeping of saddle leather, as a body of horsemen rode slowly along the sandy street. A moment later they saw the Crosby gang, twenty of them, line up across the street from the Five Tribes.

LEM CROSBY, hunched low in his saddle, and riding a beautiful horse, moved forward almost to the front of the saloon, stopped, and hailed the place.

"That old ape has shore got plenty of sand," whispered Cory.

"Sh—Listen!"

"Well, what is it?" called Selman, from the front door.

"Oh, you're at home, are you?" sneered Crosby. "I'm so glad. I reck'n you wouldn't know that some of your outfit killed one of my men, on *this* side of the river."

"What do you mean?" asked Selman, calmly.

"What do I mean?" laughed Crosby, and that laugh was a terrible thing to hear. "I told you that if I lost just one more man in this mess, on this side of the river, I was going to take your gang apart and fix it. I've come to do it, and I brought plenty of help. If you and yo' killers have got any sand, come on out here, like men, and let's settle it."

"Listen a minute, Lem," said Vard, calmly as if he were not facing death. "Neither I, nor any of my men, have killed any of your boys since this mess started. We don't want to kill any of them, unless you force it on us."

"You'll have to show me," grated Crosby.

"All right, I'll show you. When I talked to you tonight, you said something about leading some horses. If I and my boys go with you right now, and keep the dogs off while you lead them, will that satisfy you that I'm on the square?"

"Why, shore it will. I'd know you was on the square then. But, remember, no tricks. I'm fed up on 'em."

"There won't be any tricks," said Selman. "I've changed my mind about some things. You boys come in and take a drink on it, and we'll all ride together."

The Crosby Gang shifted about.

"The dirty crook is going to slip clean out of it," whispered Cory, "and we'll have to fight all of 'em."

Titus said nothing. His gun clicked softly, as he cocked it before drawing it from the holster. Just as Crosby called to his men to come on in and take a drink, there was the crash of a shot in the edge of the grove. Crosby's beautiful horse fell to its knees, and rolled over dead, with a bullet between its eyes. The dwarf sprang clear, and lit cursing.

"You damned traitor!" he yelled, firing with his last word.

Vard Selman sprang through the door and closed it, just as Crosby's men sent a storm of leaed into the front of the saloon.

They were not neglecting the front end of that grove of trees, either, for they had seen the flash of that shot. Bullets were whining and thudding among the trees, but Cory and Titus were on the ground, and crawling rapidly toward the back of the lot. When they stopped to get breath, still keeping low, Cory whispered:

"Titus, you're getting plumb careless and uncertain. That's twicet you have let your gun go off accidental, since we have been in this Civilized country."

"Yes, and you are apt to let yours go off a purpose, before we get out of this mess. Look out!"

The firing had died down for the moment. The back door of the saloon opened, but Vard Selman and his men didn't come out. Only a bevy of women, and the "professor," with his fiddle, rushed out the back way and disappeared in the darkness.

"There's hell again," grunted Cory.

"Pore Mr. Crosby and his boys is locked out, and can't get no drinks. The professor and the girls are gone, and it looks like they won't be no party, after—Uh-oh! Somebody let his hammer slip."

A gun had crashed from one of the upper windows. Cory and Titus couldn't see what had happened, but out there in the street lay one of Crosby's men, with a neat round hole through his head. Selman had been willing to patch up his quarrel with Crosby, as a matter of expediency for the moment. He didn't want to fight the Crosby gang, just now. But if nothing else would do them, he would do his best.

It was going to be no wild fight with him and his men. They were going to kill, coolly and deliberately, because they were out-numbered. After that shot, bullets whined in at the windows. But the killer had moved. Glass tinkled, as the windows were smashed, one by one.

VI

THE fight was on to a finish. Inside the old saloon was as cold, ruthless a killer as that turbulent strip of the frontier had ever known.

But while Vard Selman was marshaling his little squad of men to points where they could do most damage to the enemy, as cold and relentless a killer as himself, waited on the outside of the old saloon.

The only thing in Lem Crosby's mind, just then, was his thirst for Selman's blood. He had forgotten all about his fear of the Whiskey Trail gang, which kept all the outlaws along that border in their proper places. He knew Selman had not more than a dozen men. But they had the advantage of being in the house, and being generalled by the swiftest gunner, and the coolest and most relentless fighter that the Whiskey Trail group had ever known. But nothing could turn Lem Crosby from his purpose to have Selman's life.

SUCH was the line-up for the last of the truly great fights that Dally ever knew, and the old town had known many. A man who was, in after years, a sheriff of that border county, and who as a lad watched that fight, said that of all the fights that sandy old street had ever known, it was the fiercest.

From the time the shot was fired from an upper window, and killed the first of Crosby's men, Crosby pursued the policy of shooting the old building to kindling. That was a mistake, for the house had first been built of native oak boxing, and later weatherboarded with heavy siding. Bullets could get through nowhere except the doors and windows.

Twice, in lulls of the firing from outside, Vard Selman appeared at an upper window, and coolly killed one of Crosby's men.

Crosby was wild with rage. His men were about out of ammunition. He ordered them to break into the big general store and get more cartridges. A few remained to watch the building, while Crosby went with the others to the store. There was no guard. Selman and his men were not coming out, unless they first trimmed the Crosby gang to their size.

The store that Crosby's men had broken into was across the street, and slightly west of the Five Tribes. As Crosby and some of his men came out of the store, a gun banged from an upper window on the west side of the dancehall, and a man by the side of Crosby fell. Crosby was getting all the worst of it. Things couldn't go on this way. He waddled back to the position of his men, passed boxes of cartridges among them, and told them to pour lead into the front of the saloon.

All the men who had gone into the store had not come out with Crosby. Selman, peering from a window on the west side, had noticed this, and wondered. There was very little light—only what filtered out from lamps at the back part of the saloon. All those at the front had long ago been shattered by bullets.

A fresh storm of bullets swept in at the front. Crosby's men, being on the ground, could only send bullets into the dancehall at an angle. That made Selman's position on the upper floor fairly safe. He leaned out the window, and looked down, after motioning a man on the other side of the hall to do the same.

Each of them saw a man running along the side of the building, and each got his man. But Selman had seen their trick too late. The scent of coal oil came up to him on the night air. Part of Crosby's men had gone out the back door of the store, with pails of kerosene.

"Down stairs, quick!" called Selman to the other men on that floor, as he sprang for the head of the stairway. He must not let them fire that oil.

Selman was the first one to the back door. He jerked the door open, and a sheet of flame met him. Through the curtain of flame and smoke, he saw a man, fired and killed him, then slammed the door shut. Selman was cut off from escape at the back, and the fight was just begun.

But Selman had been gradually trimming Crosby's men down. The house would burn, but it was a long building, and the fire was at the back. He would mass his men at the front. If he couldn't get out at the back, no one could get in there. There would be a fine shooting light, presently, and Crosby and his men were outside.

THERE was a lull in the firing, while Selman gathered his men to the front of the building. Some were behind the bar, and others on the floor, between the door and windows.

Cory and Titus were still crouched among the trees at the back end of that vacant lot. Some of Crosby's men, running away from the building after emptying their pails of oil, had almost run over them.

Crosby's men had all gone to the front, now, and were standing in a group around Crosby. It was growing quite light from the flames, which were licking up the siding all across the back of the building, and well forward on the sides.

"Never seen as much ammunition wasted in one fight in my whole life," growled Old Cory. "If them gents has just got to kill one another, why don't they do it? Some of the rest of us might want a few cartridges, to kill a snake, or something, and—Here, where you going?"

"I think there's going to be a fight up front, pretty soon," replied Titus. "I aim to crawl up there and see it."

"You're goin' to crawl head first into a flock of bullets. We weren't invited to this party, and I'm ready to leave. Come on, you meddlin' fool, and let's get away from here, before them fellows gets mad and hurts somebody."

Titus paid no attention to Cory, but started crawling through the grove, keeping well away from the burning building. They were within twenty feet of the street, and fifty feet or more from the front of the saloon, when they stopped.

Throughout the long crawl, Cory had cursed Titus steadily for a crack-brained idiot. But he had followed him just as steadily, for he could remember times when Titus had followed him into worse places. They had just crouched behind the boles of two trees when things began to happen.

There was now no one in the dance hall, and there were no windows in the sides of the saloon. Fire had completely closed the back way. Crosby and his men were centering their attention on the front door and windows.

"Come out and fight like men, you lousy skunks!" jeered Lem Crosby, now beside himself with fiendish glee, at the predicament in which he had placed Selman. "Come on, Selman, you educated gentleman thief. Be a man once in your dirty life. If you can kill me, maybe you can get Ben Gurney's gal, and the Diamond G, yet."

A gun spat from one of the front windows. Crosby jerked his head to one side, and the bullet killed a man who stood behind him.

Crosby backed his men to a little longer range and waited for the fire to drive Selman and his men into his trap. Crosby could muster only ten men now, including himself. He knew they had got some of Selman's men through the windows, early in the fight, but he didn't know that only six of the Whiskey Trail outlaws were left in that inferno—when the whole rear half of the roof fell in, and the fire had eaten forward to the rear end of the bar.

"I can't lead Diamond G ponies, can't I, Selman?" yelled Crosby. "I told you just one more man, didn't I? Come on out and tell me who your folks back East are. They'll want me to send them the remains of their black-sheep, horse-thief son. You might send yo' saintly blessing along with it. Come on, and tell me what you want did with yo' carcass, before I kill you. Don't stay in there and roast. You'll be roasting soon enough, anyway!"

"IF that spider don't shut up, I'll shoot him in two," muttered Cory. "I'm beginning to side with Selman."

Titus said nothing. He was watching the bitterest fight he had ever seen, and his chief interest was to see that Vard Selman didn't get away. It is doubtful whether Selman could make out more than the jeering tone of Crosby's voice, for the roar of the flames, but that was enough. A gun snarled, and another of Crosby's men went down, just as a long strip of ceiling broke loose and fell.

It was almost over. Selman and his men must break cover soon.

Crosby's men were standing by him bravely. It was a bitter feud. The men hated Selman as deeply as Crosby did. They knew Vard Selman must not escape. If he should get away, and win back to the main Whiskey Trail gang, there would be no place on earth for any Crosby men who were left.

Another section of the ceiling fell, scattering fire to the very door. Then Vard Selman and the little remnant of his men came out, and they came shooting.

Selman's hat was gone, and the firelight glinted on his shiny black hair. With a gun in each hand, he charged straight for Crosby, firing coolly at each step as he came in.

Two of Selman's remaining men went down, and five of Crosby's, in the first ten seconds. With half a dozen bullets in his body, and his left arm hanging limp from the shoulder, Selman staggered toward his enemy, cursing the hunchback horribly:

"Who's afraid now?" he yelled. "Come on, you sneaking traitor. Come fight like a man."

Crosby was fighting. Not like a man, but like a cornered beast. He had always been afraid of Selman, and now the fear of death was upon him, and he fought like a demon. He was pouring lead into Selman by the handful, and the man just would not fall.

Vard was staggering on toward Crosby, conserving two things—the last spark of life that was in him, and the last cartridge that was in his wavering gun.

Crosby's gun clicked, empty.

Selman's gun exploded, so close that the flame from it scorched Crosby's face. Crosby fell.

Selman staggered forward a step, and fell over his victim, dead.

SO ended the bitterest, bloodiest fight that Dally ever knew, and it had known a thousand. The ruins and gnarled trees of that old town, now a peaceful community, could tell volumes about the battles of frontier days, but none excelled that one, in ferocity and the number of slain. Only one of Selman's men and two of Crosby's gained their horses and escaped back to the other side of Red River.

"Titus," said Cory, as the last of the roof fell in, showering them with sparks. "I'd like to of saw them gents fight, if they had been real mad."

"It suited me all right, the way it was," replied Titus. "But you and me didn't see it. Remember, this is in Texas, and that mess was big enough for somebody to get arrested for. Come on. We got to watch that horse-trap. I'd hate for somebody to lead them Diamond G braunks off, and old man Ben laid up the way he is."

"If it ever gets out that you started them two fights by letting your gun go off accidental, the way you did, you'll be hung without ary trial," said Cory.

It was daylight when Cory and Titus penned the Diamond G horses and saddled fresh mounts. They reported that the horses had not been disturbed, and that was all they did report. A man came to the Diamond G toward noon. He was leading four Diamond G horses. Old Ben Gurney went out to the gate, with his hat on the side of his head.

"Them's four of the last five I lost," said Ben, after looking the horses over. "I offered some fellows fifty dollars to bring 'em back, but— How much do I owe you for your trouble?"

"Nothing," replied the man. "I didn't take 'em away from anybody. They was wild loose in the street, at Dally, with saddles on. I just unsaddled 'em and brought 'em to you."

Then the man told Gurney what had happened in Dally the night before, concluding with: "I reck'n that just about ends horse-stealing around here, for a spell."

The man went on back to town. Ben Gurney went to the bunkhouse and told the story to Dave and Spence, Cory and Titus. The two saddle-tramps listened in profound amazement, as if they had never

dreamed of such a thing. When he had finished the tale, Cory said:

"Titus, I reck'n you and me can go to Dally and do our trading now. We been scared to go there, ever since that first night."

IT was the *siesta* hour again, at the Diamond G. Even Titus was asleep on the old cot under the oak tree. That is, he was asleep, until a paper ball popped him square on the nose. He roused up, looked in the right direction, and saw a red spot in the green wall of shrubbery. It disappeared, and Titus followed it. Freda was sitting on the same seat under the old pear tree. Titus sat down beside her.

"Titus, did you kill Vard Selman?"

"Me? Why, Miss Freda, I wouldn't kill nobody. I'd be afraid to try. Anyway, Cory and me was riding the horse-trap, trying to keep them Crosby boys from leading the Diamond G horses."

"That's all right, to anybody but me, Titus," laughed Freda. "I rode around that trap three times after you and Cory left. I never did see anything of you, until I saw you coming in from Dally about daylight. I beat it for the house then, because I thought you two could make out until morning."

"Why, Miss Freda, I—we—"

"Never mind, Titus." Freda's blue eyes were dancing now with mischief. "You're not fooling me. I know who cleaned this mess up. If you and Cory had not come along, they would have cleaned the Diamond G. I don't know how you did it, but you put those two gangs to fighting one another, and—"

"Why, Miss Freda—"

"Don't talk; you might say something. Let me talk. I know Vard Selman is dead, and I don't feel the least bit like a widow. I guess he was the wrong man all the time, and I didn't have sense enough to know it. I just fell for him because he was good-looking and had a smooth tongue."

"They say women do that sometimes," said Titus, glancing sidewise at the blue spots which still showed on Freda's arm.

"I know they do now. I knew it all the time, but I wouldn't admit it, until— What I needed was a fellow that I could understand when he talked. A square-shooter that would make a good side-partner. A fellow like—like you, maybe."

Titus scraped the sandy ground with the toe of his worn boot, and ran his hand over the stubble of brown beard on his face. He said nothing, because he didn't know just what to say, and the girl went on talking.

OLD Cory, who was forty-five, while Titus was only twenty-five, walked to the bunkhouse door and looked out. Titus was gone from the cot. Cory stood for a moment looking about the place. Then he heard low voices and a gurgle of laughter behind that screen of shrubbery, and a queer expression stole over his seamy face.

A red-headed woman had his partner in tow!

A minute later he was out the gate and stealing around to the front of the ranch house. Old Ben Gurney was sitting on the front gallery.

"Come in, Cory, and take a seat," he invited.

"Thank you, Mr. Gurney, but I reck'n I ain't got time. I wanted to see you, private, if you'd just step out to the gate."

Gurney followed to the gate, wondering what all the mystery was about.

"It's like this, Mr. Gurney. Titus is a sorty wild boy, of a mighty good family of folks down in old Titus County. He don't tell his name none, but he ain't did anything very bad. I promised his folks that if they'd let Titus go up the trail with me, I'd kinder look out for him. It's been a right hard job. He drinks some, and when he do, he gambles plumb reckless. You heard him say he bet his last dollar on four queens, when he had only one gun. That's bad enough, but sometimes, when he has had some drinks, he goes braunk and gets plumb rough and unladylike."

"That's too bad," said Gurney, with an odd look in his eyes.

"It shore is, Mr. Gurney. Titus has got the makin's of a fine man in him. Being an old hand, of course, I know you only hired us to keep them fellers off'n yo' horse stock, and now you don't need us no longer."

"Why, no, Cory, I don't really need you any longer. We're not working cattle, and there isn't a thing for you to do, but —I wouldn't hire men one day and fire

them the next, when they done as good work as you and Titus have done."

"That's all right, Mr. Gurney. I'm trying to get Titus back to his home, and the good influences of his old mother. If you'll just come out, and tell us sorty casual, that you don't need us no longer, we'll saddle and ride. We can make it twenty mile to the county seat, by a little after dark."

"All right, Cory. I'll do that, to help you. I like Titus mighty well, and I hope he gets settled down."

"I shore hope he does, Mr. Gurney. Of course, I wouldn't want Titus to know that I had talked to you private this way. He's right fractious sometimes."

Ben Gurney nodded understandingly.

Cory and Titus were both sitting on the old cot, when Ben Gurney came out a few minutes later. Cory was hoping Gurney wouldn't make a slip, and give away the lie he had told. Titus didn't have a known relative in the world, and had lived in Titus county but six months in his life. More than that, he was constantly busy keeping Cory sober, and keeping him from losing his shirt in a poker game. Cory knew Titus would just about shoot him, if he learned of the trick.

"Well, boys," said Old Ben, bluffly, "you have worked yourselves clean out of a job. I haven't got a thing for you to do, since them thief gangs are broke up. I won't let you go with only three days' pay, though. Here's a hundred apiece for you, and—"

"That's too much, Mr. Gurney," protested Cory.

"Nope. It was worth it to me. Come spring, if you boys want jobs, let me know."

Titus said nothing. He was dazed. He had enjoyed just one glimpse of heaven, in a pair of laughing blue eyes, and now he was fired. There was nothing for it but to ride, and the sooner the better.

At the top of the big bluff, Titus looked back, for a last glimpse of the sleepy old ranch house in the valley, where he had stood at the door of happiness, and had been too timid to knock.

The whole world was still.

"I sorty like this country, Cory," he said dreamily. "Wouldn't wonder I come back here in the spring."

"Don't look back, son," said Old Cory, in a reverent tone. "You recollect what happened to Lot's wife, for looking back. Spur up. We got a hundred dollars apiece, and they ought to be some place in that county town where we can get some drinks —and play a little game of poker!"

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Gold-Rush Rangers

By JOHN M. SCANLAND

Blood and gold came cheap in California of the 50's. Murietta and Three Finger Jack slit throats and sliced ears, reigning in cold terror from Hangtown to Sonora Pass—until the dawn they heard the doom hoofbeats of Captain Love and his California Rangers!

FOR several years in the early Fifties California was under a reign of banditry. The courts, which were timid or corrupt more often than not, were powerless to halt it. It was difficult to obtain peace officers who would follow a trail to the end when they knew the men they hunted had no scruples about increasing the population of Boot Hill. The law forces were heavily outnumbered by the outlaws who terrorized the state from San Diego to the mines in the north.

Most of the bandit spreads were composed of Mexicans who bore an unquenchable hate toward the *Americanos* who had taken possession of their country. When the reign of terror reached its height, the people of Los Angeles, San Francisco and other sections of the state, realizing the impotence of the under-manned arm of the Law, called upon the governor of California for drastic action.

The governor authorized the organization of three companies of mounted police or rangers, after the Texas system. Throughout the state there were many Texans, many of whom had served in the rangers in the Long Horn State. Captain Harry Love, a deputy sheriff; Captain Alexander Hope and Captain Hayes, all ex-rangers, applied for commissions to raise companies. They were each authorized to recruit a company of one hundred men to be paid twenty-five dollars a month by the state and furnished with horses and provisions.

Captain Love issued a call for all ex-rangers to meet him at the Los Angeles courthouse. Sixty-five men answered the call and enrolled. The grip and sign of recognition were established and the California rangers were ready to take the field. Among the most noted were—Alexander, Jenkins, Stanley, Burns, Banning, Winston, McManus, Martin, Brevoort, the two Marshalls and Kewen. All were rangers and many had fought in the Mexican War and played their part in South American

and Lower California filibusters. Some of the peace-respecting Mexicans, such as Governor Pio Pico, General Andreas Pico, and Don Ignacio del Valle, aided the rangers with the best horses on their ranchos.

The bandit gangs had a great advantage over their pursuers in being familiar with the mountain trails, roads and passes. Most of the Mexicans in the country sympathized with them and would extend no help to the rangers.

THE first work of the rangers was to run down the most notorious gang in the state, that of Joaquin Murietta. Made up of a hundred desperate, hard-bitten border outcasts, led by the vicious Murietta himself with a $5,000 price on his head, this band had piled up a tally of robberies and murders that marked them as the worst that ever rode behind the black mask. Two hundred men were killed by them within three years and their plunder was estimated at a quarter of a million.

Captain Love got some "inside information" that the band was working in the central section of the state. Another report had them riding in the south; another claimed Joaquin was seen in the north. Strangely enough, there were three men with the name of "Joaquin," each of them lieutenants of the leader, Murietta, and each commanding one of his marauding detachments.

After three weeks of hard riding, following false trails and being misdirected by friends of the outlaws, the rangers nailed them at their camp on Tulare Lake. The information had been offered by an American whom the outlaws had robbed. The rangers timed their advance so as to reach the spot at daybreak.

In the hazy dawn they discovered a thin spiral of smoke curling from the summit of a low hill. About it a group of men and horses were outlined. With a handful of rangers Captain Love ventured forward, riding in single file. The others were left at the base of the hill with orders to attack at the first shot. Love got within ten feet of the camp before he was detected.

Several of the bandits were seated around a brush fire cooking breakfast, while another was beside his horse, his gun in a saddle-belt which lay a few yards distant. Captain Love asked them where they were headed. They told him Los Angeles.

"You're on the wrong road," the captain exclaimed.

The man standing beside his horse advanced and spoke in a menacing tone.

"I'm in command here. Address your questions to me!"

Love gave him a curt but very expressive answer. The man dashed to his saddle to get his gun, but Love threw down on him with a command to throw up his hands. At this moment one of the detachment, who recognized the outlaw, spoke.

"Cap—that there's Murietta hissel'."

The bandit leader flung himself toward his saddle with hands lowered. As Burns fired and missed Joaquin leaped upon his bareback horse and tore away. Love fired, wounding the animal but not halting Murietta's escape. Bullets burned about him but he crouched against the animal's flanks and rode for dear life.

PLUNGING down a fifteen-foot river embankment, he rolled into the water, still unharmed although under heavy fire. The rangers followeed at a furious pace and finally brought down the horse. Joaquin, fighting to the last, continued on foot with a score of rangers on his heels. Love fired at close range and the notorious Murietta went down, dying without a word.

The pursuit was continued after the rest of the band, who were now led by "Three Finger Jack," Murietta's lieutenant. Some were killed by Captain Hope's rangers and the rest were caught in the north by Captain Hayes' men. Captain Love divided the $5,000 reward among the twenty men and himself in equal shares.

Hearing of a gang camped at Temescal Springs, Captain Hope, who was patrolling in the central part of the state, moved upon the outfit. Charging them suddenly, his men killed and wounded several in the rout that followed, and overtook the rest near Los Angeles. There was a running fight in the suburbs and three more bandits went down. Continuing their flight, they eluded the posse and escaped into Sonora after ten were captured and hauled back to Los Angeles.

Hope claimed them as his prisoners, since their murders and robberies had been committed in his district. The ten

prisoners were thrown into irons and taken back by steamer under heavy guard. The port was twenty miles from the county jail and the handcuffed prisoners were being marched under a ranger guard, when they were met by a Vigilance Committee. They demanded the bandits. Hope turned them over with the understanding that they would be dealt with according to law. The committee agreed to this, but with the mental reservation that it would be lynch law.

Accordingly the ten captives were marched to a beautiful oak grove with an inner circle of three large trees, ideal for neck-stretching. Ropes were taken from saddle-bows and the bandits promptly strung up.

LOVE, Banning and Winston rode down five bandits headed by Manuel Vergaras. The band had murdered and robbed a man named Porter near Los Angeles. The rangers trailed the band to San Juan Capistrano, fifty miles distant. The outlaws were headed for the border and had a great advantage over the trackers, inasmuch as they could procure fresh mounts from their friends *en route.*

Overtaking them, Love rode forward and seized the bridle of the leader's horse as he lunged at him with his bowie knife Vergaras ducked, slashed the bridle, and sped away. An Indian runner was pressed into service and the rangers continued the pursuit to Yuma, two hundred miles away. The Indian tracked the bandits to a hut on the river bank. Ordered to throw up his hands, Vergaras dove for his gun and was shot dead. The others surrendered.

Captain Hayes confined his operations to individual cases of murder and horse stealing. The outlaws usually worked in the central and southern portions of the state. Those who did venture north were handled by the miners in no gentle style. Every mining district had an organization to settle difficulties, and captured outlaws were given special consideration on a rope's end. When murder or robbery was committed in Hayes' district, he assembled his rangers and rode down the bandits with almost invariable success. Hayes was a good trailer, an excellent shot, and courageous to the point of recklessness. A Tennesseean by birth, a Texan by adoption, a cavalry veteran of the Mex War, and a Texas ranger, he was bad medicine for any man he hunted.

Hayes was called "the terror" and he well earned the title. He was always riding in the van when the pursuit grew hottest. After the rule of the outlaws had been broken, he was elected sheriff of Alameda County and held the office until he retired in his old age.

The California rangers were of proven courage, accustomed to hardships, and obedient to orders. With these qualifications they were fit opponents for the worst bandit outfits. The badmen that were not killed fled to the country below the line or else settled in the Mexican settlements of the state and went straight through fear. Banditry as an organized, paying industry no longer existed in California.

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WE'VE always had a warm spot in our hearts for the hell-for-leather lads of the old West. Wild Bill Hickock, Kid Curry, Calamity Jane and the rest of the immortal tribe, outlaw or lawman, occupy a peculiar place in the building of our country. From the number of letters we've received following the publication of the life stories of these buckskin titans, it would seem that we're not alone in our interest. Kid Curry, one of the leaders of the notorious Hole-In-The-Wall gang, has always been one of our favorites. So when we received a letter about him recently, we decided to share it. Here it is.

Malta, Montana.

Editors of Frontier
Dear Sirs:

I have a special interest in your recently published article "Butch Cassidy—Hole-In-The-Wall Hellion," because this town of Malta is only five miles east of the place where Kid Curry, together with the Butch Cassidy gang, held up the Great Northern gold train. I have seen the spot many times, and it is now marked as an historic point. In a curio collection in our city library there is part of a window sash which was picked up some time after the train was blown to bits by Curry. This sash was once owned by a pioneer merchant who, an hour after the robbery, went out there by horse and buggy and brought back part of a window of a pullman.

The bandits boarded the train in Malta and waited until it got out of town before they robbed it. This took place near Wagner, Mont., on July 3, 1901. The historic tablet erected near the site places it as a year later, in 1902, but that is not true, as I have seen in the files of an old local paper for 1901 that the story was published in the next issue after the tragedy, the date of the issue being, I think, July 5, 1901. Word was sent to Glasgow, east of here, for a posse which quickly arrived by train. When they got here, though, they had to send back for horses, so didn't get started until several hours after the robbery.

Speaking of Kid Curry, I heard an old miner's story of how he killed Pike Landusky. This miner said that Curry beat Landusky on the side of the face until it looked like a black eye. Landusky was way past fifty years old, and could still fight; but the heavy coat he was wearing prevented him from doing so. After he got to his feet he pulled out an automatic pistol, but as it was new-fangled it did not go off, and Curry drew his gun and fired, killing Landusky instantly. Curry's reason for this was because Landusky had had he and his brother jailed a few days before for shooting up the town.

I have seen the place many times in Landusky where this killing took place

on Christmas night in 1894. It is a saloon about sixteen feet wide and twenty feet long. The front door faces south and the bar runs along the east side. The whole building is of logs. Curry is supposed to be buried beside Landusky on the mountainside near the town of the latter's name. Some reports have it that Curry lives in Argentina today, and was in this town several years ago. However, John B. Ritch, the historian of the Tribune of Gt. Falls, Mont., says he died of pneumonia in Denver in 1911.

Very truly yours,
TOM PARKER,
Malta, Mont.

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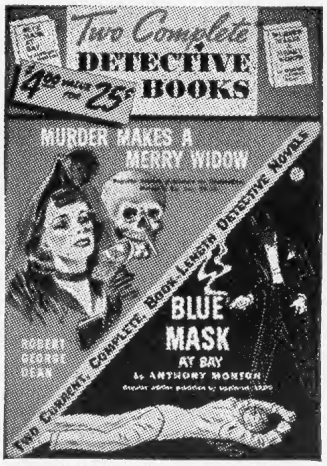

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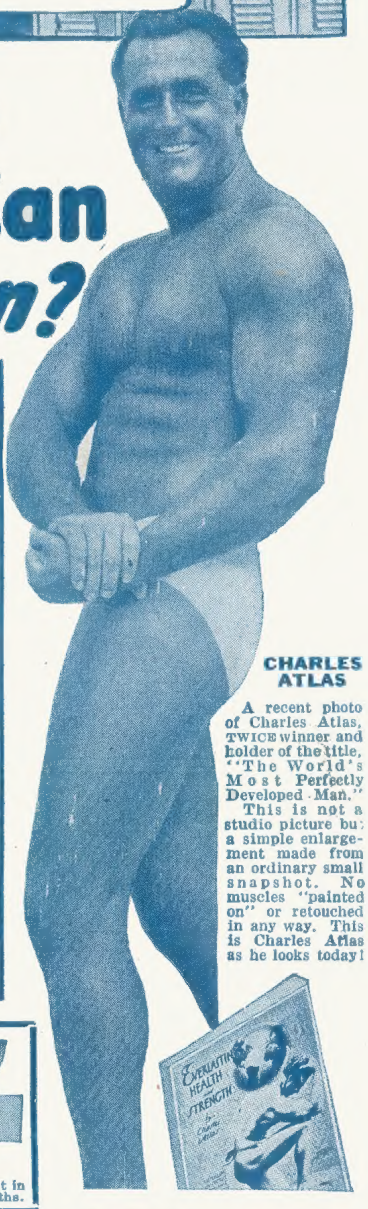

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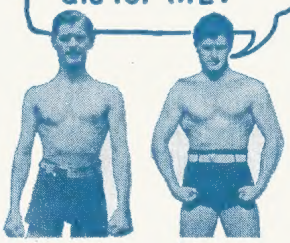

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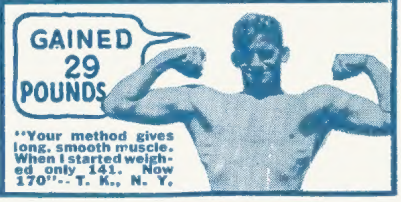

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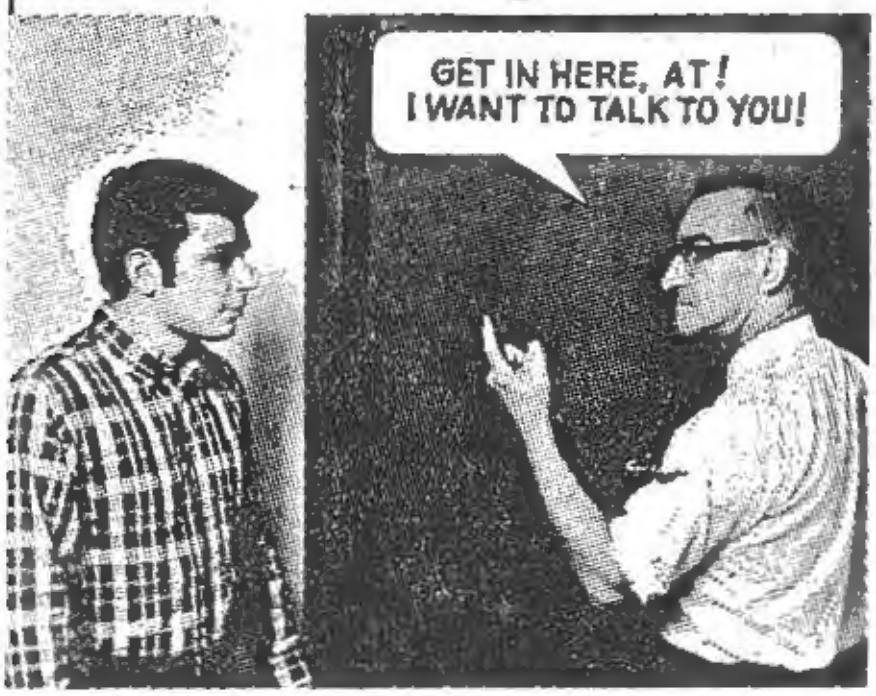

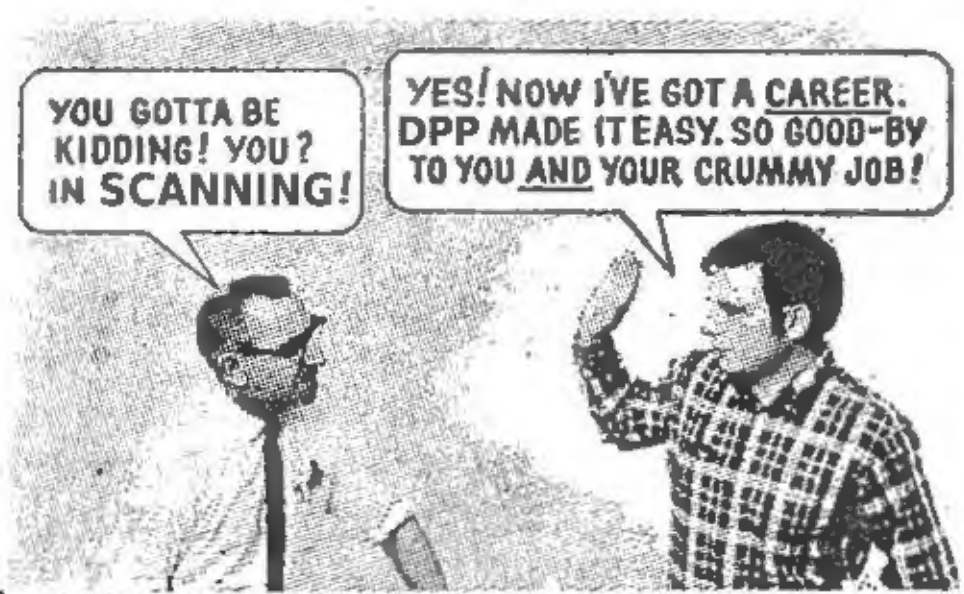

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